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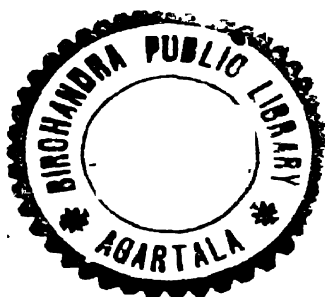
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NO COWARD SOUL

No Coward Soul

A Novel by

NOËL ADENEY



1906

THE HOGARTH PRESS

LONDON

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IT was in the autumn of 1907 that I first heard of Merton in a roundabout way. We were evacuated to a north-country town and letters would come to the family from an elderly woman who lived a few miles from our country house, Deer's Farm. She often wrote with interest of Merton Hughes the musician, and how during a specially noisy raid in the Battle of Britain she had 'clung to his arm'. As she was large, heavy and sentimental this clinging gave the impression of a tall, smug young man helping feminine incompetence in the face of danger, and I think we were lightly prejudiced against him. Soon from other sources there were further reports of our new neighbour in the country: he was an invalid and in no way involved in the war: he was out with the first sign of bombing, working hard for the A.R.P: he played the piano even as the bombs fell: he was violent and loudly quarrelled with Mr. Vincy, who looked after him; he was very quiet: he had wild parties: he was a hermit: he was queer and paid the soldiery to come: he only saw his intellectual friends.

In the following winter when Austin (my husband) and I were staying for a few days at Deer's Farm, a friend took us to tea with him, and we were mildly interested to see the object of all these conflicting remarks.

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He was living in a village a few miles from ours. His cottage being built at the end of a rough drive which skirted a stream made it more private and more conspicuous than the other houses of the village. We could see it as we drove down the hill, looking larger than in fact it was, as it stood separated from us by the slowly running water. We drove over the small bridge, and immediately turned left, along the drive, leaving a house on the right which I knew belonged to his friend, Mrs. Amy Wellington-Jones.

After a short wait at the cottage door, and a sense of some incident or disturbance within, Merton himself answered our knock, pulled a curtain aside, and at once we were in a pleasant kitchen. Talking and laughing, he led the way through, and up the steep narrow stairs to a room which in spite of the difficulties of its proportions he had made charming. Beautiful or peculiar things were arranged together to make a setting that was deep in tone, giving the whole a sensation of vague separation, as if perhaps it were beneath the sea, with clear bright colours, quartz and crystals sparkling through. It was arranged with consideration for guests, the disposal of chairs to make everyone cosy, the books and papers that might interest, music open on the piano, the simple elegant tea with fluted Worcester cups, and the choice of cigarettes. Merton welcomed and entertained as if time were allotted and cut off from the rest, or enclosed in a glass case.

During this first visit he had the appearance of uniqueness and urgency, rather than of beauty. His

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heightened colour, his shrill excited voice, his uneasy walk, stressed the need for fulfilment and rest. Could these be realized for one moment I wondered in the stimulation of meeting new people? Moving about the room quickly, haltingly, he lightly touched and talked of his interesting things; sensitively turning pages with long straight delicate hands; hands that moved with a curious awkward beauty, a syncopated rhythm that somewhere, sometime one had heard before. His curling burnished hair growing up from his face, gave an even greater vitality to it, and emphasized two fullnesses at the top of his high forehead, where incipient horns might have been.

It appeared to be true that some years ago he had had a serious accident which had left him in delicate health.

At the beginning of the war, when London colleges and schools were evacuated to places less likely to be bombed, Austin, our student children and I were living with one of these centres of education. Disliking furnished rooms we bought a house there and soon it was buzzing with the growth and interest of young people.

The movement back to London, when it seemed comparatively safe from bombs, ended this vigorous, restless, lightly rooted life as suddenly as it had begun. Austin arranged to spend half his time at the College, which settled again in the building it had left nearly two years before, and our children found convenient places to live near their respective

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works. I returned to the house and country we knew.

When the children were young we had bought Deer's Farm as a holiday home from London, intending to settle there later when Austin retired from the College, and could give more time to composing. It had been a lively place: we had enough friends in the neighbourhood to find a welcome when we arrived there, and an interesting small social life, which was constantly enriched by friends coming from London. Now the few houses belonging to our friends had been let to others, mostly to Air Force families. But it was near enough to London for Austin to spend half his time in the country, and for our children to visit us. It was in a 'prohibited area' and few others could come.

It was strange in this time of monstrous upheaval and change to find myself living more quietly than ever before. I cherished still more the firm ties of the scattered world I knew, and welcomed the unknown one which slowly revealed itself.

We were settling in and working at Deer's Farm, but it was concern with my daughter's illness that kept me from communicating with Merton, who nevertheless remained at the back of my mind. One day, reading through a collection of poems, I was surprised to find one by him, for I was unaware that he wrote. I was arrested by its wit and imaginative insight and wrote at once to tell him so. He immediately telephoned asking me to tea the next day.

In the pouring rain I bicycled by the edge of the

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wood, down the long hill through the park, by the fields and hamlets, across the stream and along the rough track by the side of it. Mr. Ivor Vincy opened the door, and with breathless but musical 'Ohs' and 'Ahs' he told me that Merton had set out for Deer's Farm by another route, fearing that I was not coming because of the downpour. He assured me that he would return soon, and that I must go up to his room and dry myself. I followed him up the cavernous stairs. He lit the gas-fire and disappeared. I waited: I noticed the casement windows placed rather low, so that the room, though light enough, was subdued. Haydn was open on the piano, orange red rugs brightened the polished floor, objects sparkled on marble or inlay. A green velvet curtain was draped on the wall at the head of a couch bed, which had on the top of it a dark velvet eiderdown stitched in large squares. The impression was of a comfortable firmness, rather than the soft luxury of eiderdown and curtains. The room was neat, polished and cared-for, except for a small table by the couch bed, which was littered and dusty with books, papers and oddments. There were no flowers.

A creak and a rustle outside told me that Mr. Vincy was coming; I removed the curiosity from my face and composed it for polite conversation, while he brought in tea, kindness and wayward remarks. I was able for the first time to observe him. During the previous visit, he had been somewhere round the corner, as if he were escaping, must know and yet be unseen. There were stories I had heard of terrible quarrels, chasing with knives, pulling of hair and

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screaming upheavals; now, talking so gently and inconsequently was a small middle-aged man, his hips draped in grey trousers, and over his slender shoulders was a rough sailor's jersey. I saw a pale face that seemed to have no outline, an amorphous kindness and spirituality floated there, beneath the receding middle coloured greying hair. Everything seemed to dissolve away, and while I was feeling consoled and grateful for his apparent courtesy and goodwill, Merton returned giving a shock to the dreaminess, shaking the raindrops from his curling hair, as wet through as I was. The room too suddenly kindled into a lively warmth; a gas-fire under the piano 'to dry it up', a cupboard open 'to dry up the clothes'.

Merton rode all the way back with me. I knew little about his illness; I suspected what I had heard to be untrue. In movement he showed signs of past illness, yet he gave no sensation of the invalid, he was so immensely gay and interested.

I remember he came to our war-time Christmas dinner. I had asked him at the last moment and was pleased and surprised that he was able to come to our party. A young man alone, I had thought, would be provided by other and closer friends for this festivity. When I opened the door I saw how lively and delighted he was, dressed very daintily in a beautifully made check suit. He at once offered a present, which like a child he could hardly wait for me to open. He gave the impression that he was dancing with expectation; a wise excited child. I sat beside him on the Empire couch, and glanced approv-

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ingly at his clothes, for surely they were meant to be observed; the beautifully cut yellow waistcoat, the fine check on the pleat running down from his side. He darted alarmed eyes in the same direction; I did not understand.

Later, when we were talking of this Christmas party I said, ' . . . but the chickens were tough!'

'I was so excited I wouldn't have noticed; it all seemed *wonderful*,' and then very quietly, 'I wasn't alone.'

LIVING in London, our children would arrive for brief visits to the country. Sometimes they came with me to see Merton, or more often they met him at Deer's Farm. While Austin was lecturing he stayed for the first part of the week in the small Queen Anne rooms we rented in a 'working-class' house in Holborn, for we had given up our London home. Sometimes I would be there, and see friends, pictures and go to a concert, and to Merton I would take back a book, gossip, or some other small present, for since the Christmas dinner I was seeing him frequently.

One of the first letters I had from him invited me to meet a woman I knew to be a considerable friend of his: he wrote, 'Mrs. Martineau will be coming, she wears grey bloomers.' For a moment I was shocked by this malice, wittily designating his friend a frump; but I realized the responsibility and need for protection he felt in the meeting of his two friends; he must be aloof and excite complicated feelings to enliven the tea-party. I arrived to hear Merton's warm thanks for some of Mrs. Martineau's home-made jam, and his lively arrangements to return the visit as soon as possible with the inclusion of myself; we were being swept into a social unit of Merton's making; we should all be churned up too quickly and compulsively. But how gay it was, the

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laughter and the heightened life. Later when Merton and I were close friends, I asked him how he had had the temerity to write the remark about Clare Martineau's grey bloomers when he and I were mere acquaintances, and he replied, 'People usually like malice, it makes them feel important, don't you think? I do it between Ivor and Amy.'

'Well hardly when addressed to a new friend against an older one. Don't we need some security that malice, however slight, isn't soon to be directed against ourselves? One fears that the new secret society will be succeeded by such a lonely exile for oneself!'

His face reddened as he turned away to say,

'Are you disappointed?'

'Disappointed? My dear, do you mean morally? Mine's hardly a virtuous feeling, simply self-protective; though I did feel sorry for Clare, she's kind and so unarmed, and no one to be ashamed of at all. Perhaps you like your friends one at a time like the telling of beads?'

During another of the first visits Merton was riding home with me in the evening, over the frosted road. He was talking of Ivor Vincy, of his difficult temperament, asking my advice in such a voice that made me laugh aloud and say,

'You speak as if we were Victorian ladies discussing the servant problem! What do you *really* feel about him?'

'I feel guilty.'

'Why guilty; your moods and tempers?'

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'No, they brighten things up. When Ivor first came with me he looked quite young, lively—rather elegant.'

'Do you think *he* feels he's wasting his time?'

'I think he must; I've made him gloomy, that's why I feel guilty.'

'Perhaps inspired him too. He seems of great importance, he must know that. "Merton and Ivor . . . Ivor and Merton." What do you scream at him about?'

'O he won't bring the meals, always late. One must do *something*. He insists on wearing that frowsty old cap of mine—anything!'

'What do you say?'

'Bastard, he-devil, and I snatch it off his head—he's infuriating.'

'And when things are pleasant?'

'Then I call him a dozen pretty names, or silly ones—my Ivory tower—anything! And he has meals with me again.'

'He seems, I think he looks—dedicated.'

'Dedicated?'

'To you, to your interests—to a dark secret belief perhaps.'

'Well it's years and years we've been together—once he made off: he came back the next day.'

'Were you worried?'

'—I knew he would come back; I couldn't stand anyone else. I like his strange world, his mad ways, his parables. He's never shocked.'

'You tell him everything?'

'He's always there. O yes we talk a lot—madly

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sometimes. What I don't tell him he reads in my note-books. Sometimes I swear at him—at his inquisitiveness . . . I don't really mind,—he's often the wise virgin,' he added, smiling with held lips.

And he told me how when he was a small boy in Siam, being unable to learn to spell, his mother had engaged Mr. Vincy to help him, to prepare him for his private school in England. He lost sight of his mild but independent tutor, who had wandered away to India. Years later, hearing that a new guest-house was starting near his college he eagerly went to see it, and Mr. Ivor Vincy vaguely opened the door and their friendship was renewed. Merton was enchanted by the pleasant eighteenth-century house and the odd but interesting welcome. The food was so good but so late that the guest-house could never have become a financial success. Sometimes the mild climate was enlivened with noisy quarrels between Mr. Vincy and his sister, who took a realistic business interest in the enterprise, while in the next room his aged mother continued her studies on the harp and dreamily proclaimed that All was Everlasting Love, and softly denied the confusions of evil and pain.

Merton was still boarding in this house when he was involved in a railway accident, and the lower part of his spine was very seriously injured. When he was able to leave hospitals and nursing-home, Merton followed his doctor, Charles Essex to whom he was passionately devoted, to Tenfield where he had moved, and Ivor Vincy gave up his guest-house

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to become his housekeeper and friend. He had been with him continuously for several years, and at that time he supposed he would remain with him for ever.

IT was not long before I met Amy Wellington-Jones at Fox's Mill Cottage. Merton had said, 'Years ago she found me on a sea-shore, and we talked of antiques; we've talked of them ever since!' Indeed on this occasion she confronted the small room with humorous, rather dolorous accounts of her afternoon at an auction sale that day. She was the widow of a Dean; a friend of mine who had not seen her for forty-five years, described her to me as 'one of the beautiful Llewellyn girls'. This one could well understand; the parson husband seemed far more remote, and her children and grandchild appeared still farther away. She was a large, handsome woman, whose aggressive courage suggested an inner perplexity and loneliness. Her Georgian house, which had at one time been an inn, stood like a sentinel at the entrance to Fox's Mill, the mansion from which Merton rented the small gardener's cottage. Her rooms were light and good sized, and crowded and dusty with antiques. Some of these were so dilapidated with age or worm that Amy would impatiently order, 'You mustn't sit on *that* chair, the leg's gone,' or 'Don't put your cup on that table, the flap will fall.' Sometimes Amy painted commonplace portraits or still-lives in a small dark shed in the garden, surrounded by junk. I admired her brightly made appearance, with

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which she combated age, and a certain *largesse* or sweeping acceptance of life, nevertheless being unused to the drill of her manner I was unwillingly subdued by it. She was very lively especially with the young. A neighbour, having seen her with Merton, said in the shocked voice of scandal, 'She was lighted up!' Amy never lost that great asset, she could light up. She brought much interest to Merton with her uncritical and boisterous social life.

When in the spring he telephoned that he was ill with influenza, I was not surprised that he blamed Amy for passing it on to him; it was during a time of veiled resentment against her, caused by some minor, or possibly imagined ill usage.*

I asked him what his doctor had said, and he replied, 'I haven't called any doctor yet. They are all rather horrible—I wish Charles Essex would return from the war, he's the only doctor that understands. Of course Amy passed the disease on, and *she* has survived without a doctor, so perhaps I shall. Even Ivor could admit that he has a slighter form of the same thing; do you think it's pneumonia?'

'Merton, do please get Dr. Elliot.'

'They never help, I hate being mauled. I should so like to see you, it's been going on for days now, long enough for any bug to have its fling, but I'm still ill because of the general precariousness of my health. I may be suffering from the aftermath of the whole accident business.'

'I'll come tomorrow.'

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‘Do bring some books. Oh, Sydney, I do hope you *will* come. Ivor has been finishing *Mansfield Park*, it’s so nice to read about Parsonages, and rolling parks, and pug dogs sitting on sofas with their mistresses when one is lying in bed dilapidated and sordid.’

The following day I knocked but there was no reply. I knocked again and walked in, and up the stairs to Merton’s room where I found him lying, covered up to the eyes, shivering and wild-looking. I filled his hot bottles, brought him water to drink, took his temperature, which was high, and asked him what had happened to Ivor. He replied that he had made off, early in the day. ‘I yelled and yelled at him, he’s infuriating; he’ll come back some time, he may be lurking outside.’

‘Did he know I was coming?’

‘Oh, well—he’s infuriating.’

I pondered this, wondering how best I should act. How could Ivor be made to understand that Merton was very ill, that it was not his ‘artistic temperament’ as he stubbornly affirmed. He was devoted to him, absolutely generous, giving him his thoughts, his services, his time; yet his illness eluded him. He *would* not understand that rigors and sickness may come from a physical cause, that he was an invalid who needed attentions. I had no contact with him, for he would rarely speak to me, sometimes not replying to my greetings, turning away with the darkest looks. He worked in his own times, polishing and treasuring Merton’s loved things, cooking delicious meals, reading aloud for hours, rejoicing in

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his successes, living his interests with him, unpredictably delighted or prim about scandal, absolutely believing in his genius, and in the life of the artist. Material payment was uncouth and usually ignored. His nature was remarkably independent, yet he was caught in a precarious dependence on Merton. He knew it and resented his slavery; he rejoiced in Merton's dependence on him, he tested and savoured it.

There is a wide view near Deer's Farm where the hills and sky join over the fine trees of Sheepcote Park. Going or coming along the lane one invariably looks that way. Seeing the quiet evening sky Merton spoke with contentment that his first long poem to be published had at last gone to the binders. There had been many disappointments, questionings—the writing of letters to Lady Olivia Standing, and waiting for her replies . . . and then the excitement! Now the first copies would soon arrive.

I was moving away, saying goodbye, when he suddenly said,

'What do you think of libel and libel actions?' He was embarrassed and turned his head away.

'I rather dislike people rushing to the law. Why?'

'The Standings . . .' They had recently won a libel case. 'O I must be *very* careful what I write about Olivia—I do feel peculiar.'

'In a poem?'

'No—my note-books.'

'Good Heavens, write what you like in your note-books, don't you use them for your poems?'

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‘. . . well, I don’t know, I feel very peculiar, I don’t know what I should do.’

I thought of Olivia Standing, strange, distinguished, gifted, growing in fame for many years. I thought of her generosity in her full appraisal of Merton’s long poem, and of this wonderful help for him.

‘Would you sue for libel?’ and he turned from me again, his face scarlet with confusion. I reminded him of a book that had recently been published where paragraphs blackguarded me. I had read some of these to Merton thinking they would amuse, but he was excessively embarrassed so that I could read no more. He had wondered at my tolerance, saying the writing was blind and misinformed. Now again, these libellous pieces must not be mentioned, it was as if they gave him an appalling personal pain.

In the early evening a few days later, Merton brought me his newly published book, the long poem. Slowly he took it from the bicycle basket, hesitated for a few moments, then suddenly pushed it into my hand. I said, ‘It’s for me? I *am* pleased, you’re giving it to me? Have you written anything in it?’

‘I didn’t know *what* to write.’

‘Now, do it now.’

And as he stood there he wrote ‘To Sydney from her friend Merton’ saying, ‘I’ve just put what Olivia put in her book to me.’ I laughed and said it was an odd repetition, nevertheless the words were consoling. But he was quiet—the books had

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come but his excitement had gone. Indoors he did not speak; looking out of the window, but without seeing the meadow or the trees, deep in himself he stood restlessly fingering the slender glazing bars. His face was brilliantly coloured and set with confusion. I knew he wanted to make known to me the horrors of his injuries, yet I could not help him. Suddenly the tension broke into words, schoolboy words blurted out to the window-pane, 'I'm done in—useless—I want you to know . . . I can't even *pee*—it's *revolting*. I wear a thing round me, I never know *what's* happening—blood too.'

'—Merton, dear Merton—terrible for you—to be so ill—but it doesn't seem at all revolting.'

'That's what Charles Essex said. He understood. I said everything to him, then I felt useless. I was too much for him—*awful*. I tried to kill myself—I burnt everything in the fire—all my writings.' Then he said with less distress, 'I think Ivor thought I'd gone dotty.'

'What happened? Did you really mean to?'

'How does one know? Another doctor came, not Charles. He was calm and schoolmastery, good really. I knew I'd been idiotic. I felt terribly ill.'

'You wanted Charles to come?'

'I suppose I wanted him to come. But, Sydney—sometimes—I can't bear it, drumming at me . . . I used to be young, light; now nothing but mad. . . .'

We heard Austin call, he was returning from London, and I saw his tall straight figure coming round the house. I went to meet him—to delay him for a few minutes. He opened the garden door, and

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a pattern of light fell on the wood floor, as he walked across it. For a moment I noticed his fine large hand holding one of the wooden hat pegs as he stood against the background of warm grey and deep green coats hanging there. It was as if I saw him anew after the few days' separation, and I tried to keep the detachment. I looked at his broad face, the wide-set eyes, the nose a little short for such a distinguished head—it was the word I had often heard used about him. I saw the criss-cross of delicate lines, the severely drawn deep ones at the corners of the mouth, and the great gentleness of expression—idealist, perfectionist, unworldly. The words 'Pilgrim Fathers' came to my mind, and broad brimmed black hats. The gentleness seemed like clear deep pools and fine trees in a remote and undefined landscape of ideas—abstract ideas of music, and of God. And I have seen travellers in this landscape, while being sure of the pools and the trees, often confused by the indistinct paths, and round some misty corner they have sometimes found themselves caught in a whirlwind, which seemed to have come without any warning or reason; at other times the climatic conditions that might be supposed to herald such a momentary storm failed to produce any reaction whatever.

Later Austin said, 'What was happening? Even Merton didn't chatter as usual. He's often here.'

'I like him to come. He brought his book.'

'I felt in the way.'

'He'd been trying to speak of his illness. I do wish something could be done—it's awful for him.'

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When he arrived he seemed sad, as if it were terribly on his mind; I've never seen him like it before, do you think it was the anti-climax of the finished book? I wish you liked him and his work.'

Looking through the poem Austin said, 'But I do admire his brilliant gifts; the clarity, even the cruelty of his penetration; but from the little I've read—I don't know what it is, a lack of breadth, or something's left out, it's antipathetic to me. I don't think he attempts to go far; I've felt that about his music too. But I quite like him, though temperamentally we couldn't be more different.'

'I'm glad he's here.'

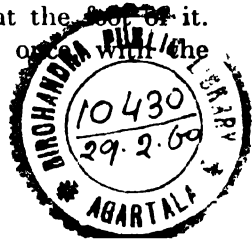
'Don't think I *dislike* him. I'm glad too. I respect him, he's a creative person—I don't think he'd ever like *me*.'

'I think he does—he seems to. He's still really very ill—paralysed. . . .'

'That's why he walks in that curious way. I'm sorry—poor boy,' and Austin went through to the music room. I heard him lightly tapping a rhythm on the top of the piano.

It was an early summer afternoon, Merton was coming to tea, and I was apprehensive. We had been seeing much of each other, our friendliness was growing, but at the same time the climate had become too close.

I came in from the garden and as usual sat on the red Empire couch, with Merton at the foot of it. I saw that he was tense, and at once, with the utmost urgency he said:




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'I've *never* felt anything like it before, certainly not since Charles.'

I waited, remembered his obsession for his doctor, Charles Essex, his miseries about him and attempted suicide, and I thought of wisdom. I assured him he would find this quite different. But as we spoke of other things, I was concerned with his words, and with the fear that I had sounded too casual or too strict. In the room people were coming and going; for the moment I did not want to remember his sensibility, his illness nor his sad isolation. I needed lightness of heart.

In the pale golden evening we bicycled to a nearby village. With the restrictions of war, we, like others, had given up a car, and in the country had returned to convenient bicycles. As we rode down the hill, and along a stretch of dull flat road, I wished I was not there. I remembered, when I was about six, how I had learnt to ride sideways, beneath the crossbar of a brother's bicycle, and later he had found one for me; a post boy's, painted red and with hard tyres. How heavenly it was. Yes, I wanted to be alone, unbothered, irresponsible, as I had felt all those years ago. We went into an inn and to a flow of Merton's emotional words, suffocating words, saying too much. I looked at his beautiful impish face; I could not believe him, and I took an immediate and cowardly respite in silence, in doubt of his words, to gain time and avoid the pitfall of making myself ridiculous.

Riding back alone I slowly began to see how perhaps I had failed him, and in a serious way. 

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The following day he telephoned asking me to lunch, and in a confused and childish voice he said, 'You may have noticed that I was quite disconnected yesterday, quite idiotic in fact. I must have had a temperature.' The necessity he felt to withdraw the urgent words, fastened them in my mind. I thought how he could not trust me, and I blamed my failure. He could not trust my insight to place the words where they had a right to be, or to allow them to float away. Was he fearing that I should make too much of them, or alternatively that I should laugh? I must tell him plainly of my affection for him; make the same 'mistake' that he had made. We would be happy friends together.

Merton came to Deer's Farm, we had meals by the fire, or beneath a tree in the meadow; we ate delicious food at Fox's Mill, we sauntered in the lovely Sheepcote Park. We picnicked in the country between, sharing our meals, talking and talking, reading, writing and painting, sheltering from the wind and the rain. The fiendish war had restricted our lives to a lovely simple living. He talked of himself, of his life, escapades, his mother, our friends, books, his writing, music. His conversation had an inconsequence, a boyishness and wisdom, lightness and depth; retreating into shyness, changing into courage and candour; with pauses and grave quietness or with rushes of nonsense and of wonderfully wicked scandal, which he often conjectured with pursed lips. Or he would talk and listen with such modest confusion that he would start, change colour,

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avert his face and turn far away. He listened with absolute attention, waiting for more. We each knew the other's awareness and delight.

There are people, especially children, who give their radiant welcome or their gifts with such an astonishing purity and grace, that our hearts are held in wonder, gratitude and something near to tears. Waiting, we are apprehensive of the surrounding mud and serpents seeping up to enclose and bite again.

And there were Merton's charming little fantasies. I remember coming home one day, and gently shining in a bay tree by my door was a red rose as if it were growing or waiting there. I took it in with me, and found open on the table by my couch, Helen Waddell's Translation of the *Medieval Latin Lyrics*, which I had lent to Merton. It was open at one of the manuscripts of Benedictbeuern, 'Take Thou This Rose, O Rose.'

These little fantasies that bring a smile and a warmth to the heart; they are the romantic expressions from those of Merton's isolated temperament, that only the creative and lively will trouble to think and do. These little floating attentions that are never voiced, always in the air. They pass by like the scent of flowers, and are gone with the breeze, sweet and calm, apparently unnoticed. They would lighten my heart which would darken again, as I perceived in him, as sometimes in the old, a grief, a disappointment that could not be cured, that never could be cured. The clear white of wonder, and the darkness of sorrow and pain, drew on his

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face, marked his whole body with the restless swing, and clutch of the blackness. Acute affliction can violate and rend, it can puzzle and torment those who see the desolation, with compassion and the eternal question 'why?'

There were other sides of Merton's nature; he wanted to know everything, to participate in life with as much freedom as others of his age, and with an awareness that would experience more. And he became acquainted with François, one of Amy Wellington-Jones's finds. He was excited with the man, and with his fabulous stories.

'You *must* come to see him. We'll go to Amy's, he's always there'; and I found a swarthy young man with a large torso and defined muscles bulging under a light blue shirt. He wearied me with his restless, noisy talk, and his complete disregard of other personalities. Merton was half spellbound, for the stranger had for him the enchantment of the romantic world of bold, strong lustful men; far far away from delicacy and imagination.

For some time Merton's talk was full of François. 'He ruffled my hair . . . he called me "old boy" . . . isn't he extraordinary? He sleeps I don't know where, in ditches and gutters.'

'He was at Christ Church . . . his mother's rich . . . he can drive a lorry; before the war he had his own plane.'

'He doesn't care what he says to me, he calls me "Merty" . . . He's good to look at, don't you think? Strong, such dark silky hair.'

And much more believing, unbelieving bewildered-

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ing talk, till François was found by the police and imprisoned for theft. We felt sorry for him, whose real name was Tom. Such a flagrant impostor, but how difficult for him with his violent neurosis to be confined, beating against the walls of a cell.

I cannot remember the order of the little events that came and went during these months. Our meetings were so frequent, casual and accepted. They remain in my mind as small pictures, often calm or gay, but sometimes desolated with the pains of Merton's illness. While quietly talking together I have seen his face smooth and relaxed, as if a grace and purity had enriched him with an insight that was beyond self-pity or greeds. It was complete and beautiful.

Sitting one summer evening in the dappled light and shade beneath an oak tree, I saw Merton as an image, and I thought, 'I can now see all around him, and from every angle, and when he starts and blushes and turns away in confusion and happiness, it is utterly delightful.'

One afternoon we bicycled to the market town, looked through the book shop, quickly ran over the junk store, and with great gaiety found a small round table at the café and ordered tea. I looked at Merton dressed in green, with a brightly printed scarf round his neck, as he sat with his knee bent, a foot on his chair and his hair spangled with sunlight as he turned his head. I saw him as an image again, graceful and brown. But how is it possible for me to convey the evanescent beauty of these times of awareness?

We bicycled back with lightness and ease, through the traffic, and side-by-side in the country lanes, talking and laughing together. And in the late evening, beneath the great trees in the park it seemed utterly peaceful. We heard a rustle overhead and a nightjar flew from the black branches, beating its wings together. I clapped my hands and made a liquid whistle, and it flew round and down to us, so near that we could see its mottled feathers. Away it went again. We waited: then again I clapped and down it came hovering near us by our supper things. The dark bird overhead, the sound and sight of its wings as it flew across the calm night sky from one fine tree to another and swerved down, down to us, and the perfect stillness of the evening—all was held in magic and in wonder.

I never tired of Sheepcote Park, lovely and neglected. The eighteenth-century house, classic and pale above the stream and the ruined boat-house. It was a civilized island in the simple countryside. One summer afternoon we found a sheltered bank, with white daisies floating over it. We lazily talked as Merton picked them, and with his long straight hesitating fingers he linked them into a chain. Our books and pencils were scattered around, the sun warmed our bare arms, the swans were brilliant on the still water, rippling their reflexion as they moved along. Everything seemed to murmur with a contentment that fell from the sky and rose from the earth of growing things uniting them. We were lightly talking of Ivor, and of some remote time when he might be insufficient for Merton's

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care. I said he should find some nice young woman whom he would teach to look after him, for Ivor might tolerate a man's help even less than a woman's, and Merton was grimly amused as he developed the idea of an imaginary hospital nurse dominating his surroundings. But the problem seemed without substance, for had he not become stronger during the summer? We imagined each of his men and women friends . . . I turned towards him as I took off my shady hat, and was arrested by the beauty of his expression, appealing, tender and open, as he deftly threw the daisy chain over my head.

Though we were often near flowers, in the garden, the meadows, or the lanes, this is the only time I remember seeing him pick them. Many times I have watched him take a bunch that had been given him, and not attending to each flower, he would stuff them in a jar as a child does. These tight bunches reminded me of Rousseau's lovely flower paintings. It seemed their stalks were pressed too close together, as if some natural order demanding light and air were being violated.

But I wanted to leave the country for a while, to stay in war-time London, and come occasionally to Deer's Farm. And I made some new clothes and went over to Fox's Mill Cottage to show them to Merton. I noticed and was grateful for the warmth of Ivor's welcome, for the trouble he had taken with the tea. Merton and I were two accomplices each appreciating the other, and knowing but not voicing

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that this meeting was tinged with a farewell. There was the shadow of the page that was turning over; neither of us knew what the next page would bring.

IT was winter in war-time London, between the Blitz and the flying-bombs. How oddly happy Austin and I were, the gas-fire blaring, the room stuffy with the black-out curtains that never fitted, that were always temporary. I can smell now the thick dead air of the little pub with its red muffled door, where we sometimes met our friends. There was the wonder of seeing a picture, or of listening to music, and I felt a quietness and cavelike contentment or loneliness in the little back room.

Austin said, 'Won't you really come to Deer's Farm this evening?'

'I'd like to stay here for a bit—finish my drawings.' I was doing some posters for a series of concerts.

'Shall I stay?'

'No, no. I've arranged things in the country, and you couldn't work here.'

'But I don't like to think of you—for days in this stuffy little room.'

'I like it—it's like a shell.'

'There are hardly any rations here.'

'Enough—I'll go out for lunch.'

'You'll be all right, darling?'

'Yes really—in my shell; anyhow you'll be here again soon,' and I reminded him that our children and an old friend whom I also much wanted to see

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were coming the following evenings. Austin knew that I hated the dim unlighted streets, the shuffling noises, the barking drunks, and had to find courage to go into them alone. Our girl and boy seemed fearless; they were often about and not using torches they would arrive in the evenings, out of the darkness into the light of the little room.

After two or three weeks I sent off my drawings and we returned to Deer's Farm for a few days. I had heard several times from Merton, and the last letter said that he was ill, and I went over to see him. He looked very wintry, perhaps we all did, but he assured me he was much better. I asked him which of his friends he had lately seen; he replied that Amy had been, and that she was desperately trying to sell all sorts of things to pay for her further buying extravagances, and the house with all her bits and pieces was getting still more out of hand. He had also seen Mildred Clough, whom he had known for many years. After the death of his mother she had visited him when he was a small boy at school, and had shown an interest in him ever since. At the time when I first met her she had a grey, Quakerish appearance, gentle, withered and sad. She revealed a quiet concern and affection for Merton, welcoming him with an encircling arm and a kiss. She knew his early setting, and the relatives and friends remaining from those days. Her home was a few miles away where she lived in quiet comfort, weaving long curtains of blue and green, and making a home for others. Her only child, a daughter, had married and lived in Cape Town.

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I was hoping he had seen, as well, some younger friends, when he said, 'Apart from these two, no one's been except Gina Downs who came to tea on Sunday—the land-girl I wrote to you about. They have strange lives in the Land Army, do you think they're really very tough?'

'Why, breeches and swear words?'

'No, she came to tea in a neat blue suit, and when I said what a nice plaited belt you've got on, she answered "It belonged to my landlady's husband, he gave it to me", and then and there she took it off and handed it to me to play with. For the rest of tea it lay abandoned on the floor. I had to remind her to put it on before she left.'

'What is she like?'

'Strong—dark, silky hair.'

I laughed and said, 'That sounds like François!'

'She's quiet; no, not like François. She told me things about herself. Her father and mother come from different classes. The father quarrelled with the mother because he felt so classy, till she became all dithery, and then she died. Gina says she's quite divided between the two classes. She has a younger brother and when he comes home drunk and very unhappy she puts cold sponges on his head; she likes him very much.'

'What does she do on the land?'

'She *was* groom at Hyam's stables—it was he who told her to come and see me. There was the other groom, Fred Downs: she said he looked "an angel on horseback".'

'I thought that was something to eat!'

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'Well, she said he did try to poison and strangle her; but not at first. They married. She wanted to marry, she wanted security, she *said* she had a baby!'

'And she didn't get it—the security, poor girl?'

'No, there were terrible rows. He was a "spiv" and they spent their time on dog tracks and race-courses, usually drunk. She left him.'

'For someone else?'

'She didn't tell me any more. She's horseman now at a farm near Stitchley. She seemed more or less soothed by these surroundings. She said, "It's awfully nice here, what'll happen if I miss the last bus home?"'

'And did she?'

'No, I pointed out that it would be difficult as there was no spare room, and Mr. Vincy would feel put upon if we gave him extra work with the camp bed in the kitchen. She then said "You don't run this place properly, you're Master, aren't you?"'

'I don't like that, poor Ivor! But what happened?'

'With a lot of manipulation I did get her on to the last bus and in the dark we both fell into the ditch!'

I laughed at this schoolboy nonsense, and asked if Ivor had seen her.

'He just brought in the tea and disappeared, and then watched from behind the curtain when we left. He only said something cryptic about "coming down like a wolf on the fold".'

'And you're the little lamb?' I asked, amused.

'And he's the good shepherd,' he said without irony, which shifted the level of the conversation.

'Gina's asked herself again next Sunday. She says

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she writes poetry, which reminds me of *World*, isn't it frightful? Olivia has written a whole long article on modern poetry in this number, so she's almost bound to read my short poem. I think I must stop publishing if I go on feeling so peculiar about it, and this one's the very worst for publication. Olivia's hair will stand on end. And my long poem's been driving me to distraction. I got into such a turmoil about it, that what do you think I did? I wrote to Edwin, as a comparative stranger and a good critic, and asked him if he'd read it through, and give me frank criticisms on its shame-making qualities.'

'What does he say?'

'I had an answer this morning, you read it. I've sent it to him but I'm sure he'll send it back with lots of blue pencil and sober comment. He always makes me feel rather mud-larking schoolboyish! I probably shan't change one word he says, only ponder on it, don't you think?'

'Do you never take advice? I've never known any-one so wilful and stubborn!'

'But perhaps this poem will be all right. Someone said I wrote like a poetic D. H. Lawrence! At any rate it isn't full of loins as *Women in Love* is.'

It was some time before I saw Merton again. He wrote arranging to come to Deer's Farm during my next short visit there, but he was still ill so I went over to Fox's Mill to see him. He was again in a light excited mood, and he began to tell me the immediate gossip, saying very primly,

'Amy went over to lunch at Sheepcote Park. She'd

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put on her new baby seal coat, and they had pheasant and Algerian wine. Then they went into the library, and Amy said that it and the park were lovely, as she unwisely sat on the sofa. Sir James immediately got out his Fragonard book and sat beside her to show it. I gather the atmosphere then got rather uncomfortable for when he was about to produce his Beardsley book as well, Amy jumped to her feet, said she had people coming to tea, and suggested he went for a good ride! Amy got back very early to her house and didn't know what to do with herself, all dressed up, so she came to see me; it was then that Gina came again. We devoured toast and talked at cross purposes. It was terrible. Amy quite paralysed Gina. Soon she went to do her black-out, so Gina and I were left by the gas-fire.'

'Why couldn't they get on? Young people usually like Amy.'

'Gina said, "I'm terrified of women like that, will she ever come again?" Then we went out in the moonlight and posted two manuscripts of mine. Afterward we went for a long walk, and I showed her the wood, the boat-house, the lake; all in the moonlight. It was wonderful, somehow quite magic, like some night that had been caught in a trance for a hundred years. Everything was utterly still, and everything had a halo. A mist rose up from the stream, and the moon shone through the mist. We walked right through the park to where the cricket pavilion glimmered quite white in the fields. Then we came back, when Gina told me more stories.'

'Have some tea now, and then tell me more.'

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‘—How one of her brothers went mad, and how she had to sit on his chest for twenty minutes. It was *dementia praecox*, and the brother used to give money away at Waterloo station, and try to bounce with his fiancée on the floors of taxis. The fiancée objected, and the brother got more and more demented until the all-wise young brother I told you about before suggested that he and one of the others should go out and find him a nice quiet tart. But the father pooh-poohed the idea and wouldn’t allow it. So eventually the brother was put in a mad-house where he died of pneumonia.’

I saw that Merton had more to tell me, and I smiled at his pursed lips, guying himself, for he was deeply shocked by disturbing human vagaries.

‘It’s all terribly sad, so let’s turn to drink and drugs and high life and poetry. You know Lady Blank, who asked me to the poetry reading the other day? She’s in the nursing home where I was for months. She’s *supposed* to have neuritis. I was told by one of the people who helped to recite the poetry at the reading. He was at the Hall when a fantastic scene took place. He was sitting near the front and took rather a long time to put his coat on. Suddenly a woman rushed up to Olivia and the others and said, “Why wasn’t I allowed to recite?” and a great deal more. Tears streamed down her face, and Olivia burst into tears too. Someone tried to calm Lady Blank but she screamed, “Don’t touch me.” The scene was frightful, and the Queen had only just left; nobody knew what to do, it was awful. . . . Since then the schoolmaster’s been able to talk to

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Lady Blank. She let her hair down a little, and said her son was the worry of her life, he was such a naughty boy. It's interesting, isn't it, that a naughty mother's still conventional about a naughty son?"

'That remark,, or the way you said it, vaguely reminds one of *Hindoo Holiday*.'

'I don't like to think of that book.'

'Why ever not? I thought you'd like it.'

'I did: I pondered and dwelt on it: it *influenced* me.'

'Then why don't you like it?'

'One never likes the hand that fed one.'

'What nonsense, you like your mother's.'

'—and she died.'

'So you think if you accept an influence, or rely on it, it will be taken from you? Is that why you're so repudiating?'

'Well, one must be self-sufficient. Sydney, why do you think my mother died; do you think it was T.B.?'

'Has no one ever told you?'

'No—and she seemed quite young—and pretty. She drove away from school; she leant out of the window; her hair was bright and curly, one was blowing in the wind. I waved to her, she never came again.'

'And she died in Siam?'

'And my father never spoke of her again. No one ever spoke of her again; it was as if one shouldn't speak her name.'

'Leaving complete mystery and desolation.'

'It gradually got better; I was surprised that it got better.'

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‘And when your father married again?’

‘O I quite liked Alice. I never connected her with my mother at all. She’s a large business woman, rather brassy. I went with them on their honeymoon; I saw her managing everything, my father and his business. I suppose I should resent her more, for my father left all his money tied up to her, and then my allowance stopped: it distinctly made me poorer. It’s as well that I have the invested money.’

I said, ‘Where did it come from?’ and was surprised when Merton blushed scarlet and dropped his lids to say ‘—O my mother’s.’ I regretted my question and suddenly thought of compensation money for the accident; his embarrassment seemed to turn it into doomed money. He continued, ‘I never for a moment thought I should make any. After my father died and the allowance stopped, Ivor and I didn’t know *what* to do. We sold everything we could—all his bits and pieces.’

‘And your brothers—Stephen and John and Bruce?’

‘They were in the war and far away, and now I really have enough for our needs, what with one thing and another.’

I said, ‘Where’s Ivor now?’

‘Having a bath. He looks good in his bath, better than you’d think.’

‘No, I think he’d look nice—beautifully made—elegant.’

‘Delicate shapes, clear creamy colour. I scream at him if he comes when I’m there—I madly snatch at a towel. He says it’s idiotic of me to fuss, he’s said

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it again and again. It's different for me—spoilt and disgusting.'

'Doesn't it hurt his feelings—snatching at a towel? He isn't disgusted and you know it.'

'Well—he ignores horrors. I believe if I were entirely decaying and falling to pieces, he'd still be unconcerned and not revolted: this attitude of mind has been of great help to me.'

'And when he's ill himself?'

'He'd never admit it. Sometimes lately he's looked *very* peculiar. Is he starving himself to give *all* the good food to me?'

'What does he think of Gina?'

'O we like a little excitement—something to talk about——' Then he said, unexpectedly; 'Sydney, do you think *I* have T.B.?'

'But why should you have it? But ask Elliot, he'll tell you—I'm sure he would have told you. Have you seen him lately?'

'He bounced in and said he'd thoroughly enjoyed my long poem, and wanted to tell me so. He said he'd sent it to Charles, and he's got it, and he's read it! I wanted to hear more details but none were forthcoming. He asked me about my health, and said nothing more could be done about it, but he thought I ought to see a specialist about every *six months*. Doesn't this sound appalling? He seems to think it quite serious that I have so many feverish attacks.'

'What specialist did he suggest?'

'He wasn't much help, so I would very much like to know of a good consultant, if your medical

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brother knows one. Gina thinks the damp here by the stream helps to drag me down. I'm so enraged with it all; I seem to go to bed every fortnight now. Elliot says I *must* go to bed when my temperature goes up.'

'Of course, but we'll find a good specialist for you.'

'I hate falling to pieces, it's so repulsive.'

'You seem to gather yourself together, better than most people—and do a vast amount of work. What about your writing?'

'O I'm feeling particularly self-conscious now. Two were sent back with "beautifully done but too amoral for publication". The editor also added that "it takes lots of courage to reveal one's true self, but it was courage not generally appreciated".'

'How did you reply?'

'That when I had written something guaranteed not to bring a blush to a young man's cheek I'd send it to him.'

I laughed and said, 'But the older people don't seem to mind.'

'They are much more accepting and unquestioning. But perhaps he made me too hot and bothered; I'm so tired of all this absurd hypocrisy.'

I thought he had talked enough, and looking at his eyes which had become large and polished black, I got up to go, saying,

'Perhaps it would be best if you had a few days of quiet, seeing no one.' But he at once asked me to come again before I returned to London.

In a day or two I found him still lying on his bed,

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papers and books scattered around. He had called before I was in the room, and I knew that he was better.

'I'm chiefly lying here so that I can battle with the last piece of my poem. I haven't seen anyone at all, and am in a completely cocoon-like state.'

'Have you been out? I didn't telephone, you knew I was coming.'

'On Monday I bicycled till I came to Appleford church. It's little and deserted, so I went in and sat cosily in the chancel and drank my thermos tea. As I drank I read your Edith Wharton's reminiscences. Don't you think it rather good in a high-souled nostalgic way? The part about Henry James, and that queer Howard Sturgis who did his knitting in the Queen's acre at Windsor?'

I remarked that I often enjoyed reminiscences, and he said,

'The more I think of it, the more I feel that you ought to write a sort of reminiscence book.'

'Still more things for me to do, isn't my life too full already, and with nothing done?'

'I think you would *hate* mustering your forces for it, but when you were in the rhythm of it you'd enjoy it, and these books are always nice to read. I think you would make it very exciting if you were bold, and didn't mind what you said. You probably would make money too, which is nice.'

'But the time, Merton——'

'You'd make it, but it's curious that I should be saying this to you when my own writing's been driving me crazy these last few days. Perhaps I want

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someone else to become equally insane! Perhaps I want you too to have things returned with "beautifully done but too amoral" written all over them. I don't want to send Edwin my long poem now at all; it's like sending a bit of yourself in a parcel to undergo a nasty little operation.'

'But how are you?'

'Better, but Ivor's been appalling today. I'd like to put a chain and collar round his neck, and fasten him up outside.'

'Merton, you asked me about a specialist. There's a good one for you. I wish my brother could have said you were a nephew or something, but he's spoken to him and he won't charge much he says. Will Tuesday or Thursday next week do at three?'

The time was arranged, and I thought it best for everyone that I should stay no longer. Ivor had answered my greeting with silence and black looks, and I doubted the wisdom of having given to Merton the jar of honey that I had brought for him. As I went out of the room I was anguished by the sensation of his utter loneliness.

Soon Austin and I went down to Deer's Farm again. The days were becoming longer; the house looked clear and calm, and I felt intensely the coming home to it; the small whitewashed house, built about 150 years ago, and set on a grass plateau away from the road. The garden side at the back had the long windows facing the lawn, the ha-ha wall, and the meadow below, and the great trees of Sheepcote Park beyond. As we came round the house we found Merton there, resting on a garden seat with his

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bicycle propped against it. He stood up suddenly with the drilled response which brought to my mind 'A man does not sit while a woman is standing', but his *spontaneous delight and chatter* swept away the too jerky convention. He seemed a part of the house, of the country, so often was he there; we had the communication that unites the middle-aged with the young of Merton's temperament; the subtle imparting of knowledge, of wisdom, of compassion, and of laughter. Few women could fail to find such companionship agreeable—it is a relationship that seems less self-interested than many others; though it is deeply rooted, it is delicate and easily damaged by interference or suspicion.

Years later, speaking of his poems, a friend said, 'I only met him once, it was in your country house, he was sitting on the ground by the fire wearing your slippers. You were both smoking pipes; yours a slender one, his a little thicker. It was only for a minute or two, but I shall never forget it.'

I was touched and said, 'Why will you never forget it?'

'It was so lively and so tranquil.'

We lighted the fire, and when we were alone he began at once to talk about Gina; of the letters he had had from her, and of his own returned by her, because he would not have Gina's landlady 'cackling' over them. I asked him what Gina was doing now, and he told me that she was waiting for a cosy job, for the work at the farm had been too much for her.

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'She's very quiet—she says she hasn't had a drink this year. She wrote me a very efficient and high-minded letter. I must have been a governess to have impressed good behaviour on her in this way. I feel uncomfortable. I feel she'll turn up next Sunday all starched and proper.'

I asked him about the specialist, but Merton would only say, 'Well' and 'Um' and 'Oh'. He had appealed for this advice, but he would not take it.

He had begun his new poem, and 'I'm certainly not going to show it to Edwin in manuscript. I think in a way he's right about the one he read. It's obviously scatological in bits, and it's obviously harping on the same theme, which also runs through the others. The only thing is am I to take these two things as undesirable? Sydney, what do you think?'

'I suppose you can hardly stop writing and wait till you have a change of heart and of temperament.'

'The new poem is *agonizing* to write—about the accident, about pain——'

I walked to the road to see him go. Suddenly Merton blushed scarlet like the letter-box near which we were standing. The colour looked vivid on his neck, between the dark head and the green-yellow mackintosh he so often chose to wear, while he said,

'Ivor's been making a great many unsuitable suggestions about the dedication of the finished poem: most unsuitable!' Asking if he could come the following day, on his way to his old friend Mildred Clough, he added, 'Ivor also makes remarks about my visits to Mildred, about wills not always turning out as

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one expects them to. He goes very far, don't you think?"

There were hints about Mrs. Clough's will. I thought they were intended to be lightly amusing; they probably were at the time; it was after her death that I realized how serious they had become.

I HAD started a bad attack of influenza in London and was recovering at Deer's Farm, when Merton brought Gina Downs to see me. I went outside to welcome them as they came round the house to the garden door. Merton came first, looking as if he were dragging by a rope a dark-haired girl whose head was deeply bowed. Her hands were hanging from a strong torso which was covered by a light brown riding jacket. With her legs shambling she reluctantly followed.

Merton and I chattered, the young woman was dumb. I noticed her kind but frightened eyes, the low empty forehead, the mouth grimacing with scorn or fear. I saw an aquiline face with dark straight brows; a face that changed from a bland smoothness containing no thought to an intense corrugation in an effort to have some or to avoid it. It was as if she had within her some perplexity or reflection which she feared to acknowledge. I wondered at her timid and aggressive bearing, her legs so lavish in gesture as she stretched her feet to the fire, her tight short hands as she held the arms of her chair, or with a flourish of one of them, and with unopen fingers, she flung back the heavy lock of hair, which fell again to conceal her downcast averted face. I wondered if these reserves and gestures were always ready to battle with this inner foreboding.

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She began to trust a little, and at last I heard her speak. A pleasant voice, very modest, with those mispronouncings which are often endearing, she said we should keep 'chickings' in the meadow.

I was not surprised when Merton arrived the following day to hear my impressions of Gina, and to talk about her: to continue the subject he came again and again. And he was full of the success of his work; an appreciative press, and several publishers were asking for it. I liked to hear him talk of things that excited him; it was lively and he trusted me.

I returned to London, to see the children, to arrange some work, and Austin had a difficult lecture which was bothering him. There was very much to contend with in war-time London. Then the little room had become too dirty; we swept and scrubbed and polished, and talked to the old woman who lived in the front room, sharing the first floor. She knew all the district well, and told her many stories with a level acceptance. One evening she hobbled across the room, she had arthritis, and from her Victorian glazed cupboard took a charming little farm-house jug; looking up, she said, with great gentleness, 'Perhaps you will accept this.' It was given with a perfect grace.

This little house was so dilapidated, the wind whirring through the cracks, that later, after we had left, the tenants were ordered to leave within a week; no sooner had they gone, than, in the windy night, it slipped down into the street, with a noise

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like a bomb, and sending up a cloud of dust. I went to see it; the delicate staircase was still hanging to the next wall, and I thought of ourselves and our friends, and imaginary people, back for 250 years; in drab and fine clothes, in happiness and despair, walking up and down, up and down.

While occupied in London I had a curious letter from Merton which was surprisingly insensitive and obtuse. I was astonished: I had never encountered this in him before, and I was uncertain how to reply without giving pain. I might have laughed it away, but laughter seemed useless, so I left it till I should be seeing him again. It contained at the end several naïve remarks made by Gina about me, but I could not believe that she had engendered the fear and aggression contained in the letter. The tone of it wounded me, and I composed in my mind a priggish ready-made reply such as: 'I should be pleased in other circumstances to feel those glamorous sensations of which you seem to disapprove. I am flattered you have noticed a light in my eye, or an exhilarated manner, but you certainly lack insight in your sudden interpretation of these, for you transpose them to a crescendo of feeling in me, which time has gradually, perhaps mercifully subdued. Your fears for yourself are unfounded.'

When, sitting by the fire at Deer's Farm, I saw him looking strange and bereft, I should like to have overlooked the incident of his odd letter. It was on his mind and he began with a courageous excuse.

'Sydney?'

'Yes—your letter?'

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'I mustn't be mistaken for one of those insufferable people who always imagine themselves to be the object of other's desires.' I waited. 'I know I'm of the physical type—the least desirable, the most uninspiring to women, I *hate* that remark but I don't know how else to say it. You know it's the vanity I don't suffer from at all.'

'Then why did you write as you did, putting us both in a false position, forcing me to search my feelings and behaviour?'

'In writing like that I was well aware of putting myself in the dangerous position of appearing poisonously conceited and idiotic—I simply had to trust you not to beat me with sticks I'd so conveniently put into your hands.'

'Well then—what *did* you mean?'

'What I felt then, and wanted to try to clear up in that bald and clumsy way, was any apparent lack of perceptiveness on some occasions, any jerkiness in my behaviour when the atmosphere became turbulent or pregnant; that is if it ever did—all the trouble may have started in my own disordered imagination.'

'But why ever did you present me with these wretched sticks? Someone else handed them to you, and you foolishly pass them on to me. Why did you accept them for one moment, those crude and wicked beating rods?'

'But, Sydney, when I repeat Gina's naïveties or Ivor's ineptitudes it must *never* be taken that I'm using them as a mouthpiece for my own secret thoughts. As an example, I told Gina that people,

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however much they liked one, would generally not thank one for putting them into a poem, and I explained playfully to Ivor that my prize was above rubies, so I couldn't be bought with a pound of honey. I simply repeat these sayings as one repeats anything when one's talking freely.'

It was clear that he was side-stepping, but I asked him again why he should need to confuse and displace our friendship, but he evaded a reply when he said, 'I think more and more that putting some of our feelings into words only clouds the issue, making it *much* more difficult to feel clear and untrammelled than in the tacit understanding that went before. Only yesterday that was proved strongly to me by the letter I had from Gina. It was a charming letter, really straightforward and poetic mixed in one, but she had to spoil it at the end by stupid troublesome heart-searchings about "love", whether it's possible for two people to say they really love each other.'

'Isn't it better to say they have a certain fondness for each other's company?'

'But since I've never mentioned the word "*love*" to Gina, or ever expected her to love me in the fanatical all-embracing sense she mentioned, I became furious and wrote what was probably a very unwise ten-page letter. I expect she'll now think me quite unaccountable and hysterical, but I became so annoyed with this silly search for absolutes that I didn't mind what impression I gave. How does a person of her divided personality expect to find complete love with anyone, either man or

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woman? Will she find it with me? Will she find it with the girls she meets, or with the innumerable landladies' husbands? It seems extremely doubtful to me. I suppose I should have liked her plainness and simplicity in explaining her doubts and misgivings as to her true feelings towards me, but I didn't; I found her openness both burdening and insulting. I really find these measuring rods of affection horribly clumsy instruments; they seem to inflict awful wounds on the affection itself. It's as if all feelings below a certain level were counted as nothing, and that every effort was being made to force unnaturally one of the feelings over this level so that it could be called love. I really am exhausted with this straining after love and this wailing over the lack of it. It's a false god, and it swallows its victims up mercilessly, so that they become nothing at all. But you must be bored with all this about Gina and me.'

'You know I'm interested; but you write me a curious letter, quite unlike yourself, and which needs explanation; now you say how impossible situations are when they're dragged out into the open. You are bewildered and bewildering.'

Merton was thinking only of Gina; it was difficult for him to leave the subject, but he said, 'Now I suppose I'm an obscurantist, and of course it's not always easy to rest content in that state at all; a part is always longing to have everything clear-cut like a diamond; but efforts in that direction only seem to make confusion worse!' We agreed, and he spoke of Gina's comings and goings; of quarrels, reconciliations, mad drinking, and the wild emo-

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tional talk; days and days of it. I knew it was deathly for Merton, and he knew it too.

The attacks of sickness, fever and pain, were frequent now. Merton would lie patiently, waiting for them to pass, with dark puzzled eyes that haunted me. Sometimes they were deep and terrible in their assault; his head would be swathed, his eyes closed, his hand holding one's own for life.

One day we were picnicking by a haystack, and he came from the other side where he had retired, and said with his eyes dark and troubled, 'It *can't* be right, there's so much blood . . . great dark clots of it . . .' and he spoke of other symptoms. He again asked me to find a specialist through my brother. Appointments and fees were arranged but again he chose not to go. Dr. Charles Essex whom he trusted was still away. I believed he needed more help than he was having, and Merton thought so too, but he feared that a specialist would suggest a treatment that might send him away from the freedom of his cottage and back to a dreaded hospital again. I could not persuade him.

He was very sensitive about the results of his accident. I completely sympathized with this, and guarded any knowledge I had, whether it came from things he had told me, or from my own observation. I spoke only to my medical brother, when Merton had asked me, through him, to find a suitable doctor. My brother is a specialist in other maladies, and he never met Merton.

One afternoon Merton's friend, Amy Wellington-

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Jones, called to me from her garden by the iron gates to Fox's Mill, 'Mrs. Evelyn, I've been wanting to catch you. On the bus going to the shops today, Dr. Elliot came and sat beside me. He says Merton doesn't urinate properly, it just drips away, and he's poisoned by it. What *does* he mean? I knew when they stayed with me, that Ivor arranged a mackintosh sheet at night—Dr. Elliot says he can't *possibly* live much longer. You're the only one who can influence him . . . he shouldn't go up that hill to Deer's Farm, it *must* be too much for him.'

I thanked her for telling me, assured her I would do all I could to restrain Merton from doing too much, and continued my way up the drive with the words 'he can't possibly live much longer' thumping in my head.

This repetition of a doctor's remarks to Amy was the only informed and educated opinion I ever had about Merton's illness.

A few days later when Merton spoke of coming to Deer's Farm, I casually suggested, as I had several times before, that it was too far coming up the hill; we would meet in the park, or I would go to Fox's Mill Cottage. He replied,

'It makes me feel cooped up. But that's what Amy's always saying about Deer's Farm. It's her interfering, controlling ways, only yesterday she said, "When is the *di-vorce*, Merton?"'

IT was a tiny snuff-box that I had given to Merton, when he asked if I *really* understood how childish he was about little trinkets and toys from the past. How he became all crooning and ecstatic 'like Elizabeth Myers when she looks at a blade of grass stuck in a ball of mud', but with him it was always man-made things from another century. He said how his fantasies would grow and swell until he had created a whole peculiar dream-like scene with the box, or whatever it was, playing its part in the middle of the stage. And how as a child he used to wonder how anyone could be blind to the extraordinary fascination of what was old. This antiquarian mania and wild desire to cherish and preserve anything he could, used to cause much amusement and teasing.

He told me he had been working, but later, feeling unwell, he had fallen asleep, which was rare for him during the day. He had dreamt that people in fancy dress were mounted on horses and were splashing through a flooded field near a river. A woman suddenly attacked a small boy, and they were stabbing fiercely at each other with glittering spears, until the boy looked half dead. And he talked about Gina; of his hopes and fears with regard to her and of his blunders. I knew that Merton could not live long in this climate of passions, despairs and of

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drink. I asked him if he knew how particularly determined he himself was, and how perhaps his relationship with Gina would be less exhausting and wasteful if he controlled the violence of his will, and he replied that 'even Amy' had asked him if he had given as much time and attention to his new poem as to his others, that even she had noticed that things were not right. ~~so~~

And he spoke of Olivia Standing; he realized how much she had helped him; the letters and telegrams of encouragement, and the wonderful review of his first long poem. He talked of the present he would like to give her; he thought of a ring, 'she has cardinal's hands'. From a box of trinkets he took a large amethyst that had belonged to his grandmother, but how in war days could he get it set? We did drawings together; we consulted a craftsman acquaintance, but it seemed impossible to have the work done. (Later Merton had this amethyst set and gave it to me.)

So one day he came to London. I met him as he opened the door of his cab at the jeweller's. He was dressed with Edwardian elegance; his pale yellow gloves held in one hand, his silver-knobbed stick in the other. He was 'dressed up' to come to London. In the subdued light of the shop the search began. Tray after tray of winking rings. First one attendant and then another. There were large ancient Roman rings, very beautiful light soft gold, and I hoped Merton would choose one of these. There were stones framed in small ones, delicately set. The proprietor himself came to help; at last Merton chose

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one that looked Italian, square, raised high with enamelled sides. He was exhilarated as he left the shop, and we walked east, passing the dark hospital, remembering his agonies there, putting them aside. We had tea from eighteenth-century bowls in the modest Queen Anne room in Holborn, with no pause in the talk. We rang the bell of my daughter's flat; she was out, only the dustbins stood outside by the heavy, dusty seventeenth-century door. Trying to find a taxi we hurtled along the street towards the station, no use my efforts to halt the pace. Drunk with excitement Merton poured out his thoughts; his face quivering, his uneven walk showing the metamorphosis soon to come.

The next days he was recovering, and lovingly polishing the ring; finding a suitable box for it; sending it off. There was quietness again.

But it was not long before I heard bewilderment in his voice, as he telephoned to ask me if I could go over to his cottage. I was hardly in his room before he began,

'Sydney, I must tell you. Last night I had my supper and lay back and was reading, feeling sun-burnt in the face and my temperature rising slightly above normal. At 10.30 I felt I had to get up and go to bed, when suddenly a voice in the wind calls "Merton". This has happened before, so I was more or less prepared. But what should I find when I go down to the door! Not Gina alone but Gina *plus* another, Jo Mason (sticking-out ears, large smooth-faced, rather pug-nosed, baby-looking). This entirely bowls me over and I say faintly "Come in, what's

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happened?" Gina, tentative, apologetic, nervous, "Merton, I've got a friend here too, and we've missed the last bus. We got out because the train was so full, to have a drink, and we missed the last by ten minutes." "

'Did they both stay?'

'For a few minutes I don't know how to cope, then I lead everyone upstairs and we stand about and smile and say nothing and then laugh. Ivor extremely curious, pokes head with rumpled hair round corner and asks what's happening. I begin through sheer desperation to get awfully social then, and I force Jo Mason into an armchair and give him beer which he isn't awfully keen on. Ivor begins to dismember his bed; soon the floor's strewn with mattresses, palliasses, flea-bags, army blankets, and ragged pillowcases. My room's a complete doss-house, and after long talking into the night, we all begin slowly to go to bed. I learn that they've stayed up in London since Easter, swimming and going to the dog races; Gina lost everything.'

'Poor Gina, was it much?'

'She didn't say. They both snore, there's no possible sleep for me, so I just lie and think, and the moon rises slowly till it's shining right on my face, then a nightingale, a quite real nightingale warbles and tremolos and weeps for the rest of the night.'

'Couldn't you sleep a wink, Merton?'

'Not a wink. When I looked round the room in the morning, it seemed as if it had been struck by a tornado; Gina and Jo's bodies were like corpses! But

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gradually Ivor pulled himself together and brought us tea, then reconstituted eggs and your marmalade and coffee, and Jo told us at length of the strangeness of life in the navy, where he was. He talked about his crook friend who made £900 out of black-market goods; then I began to feel a bit dotty; Gina just sat quietly. Jo said, "A fine little place you've got here, Merton, I'd like something like this." Then we went into the wood and looked at the primroses, and tried to find the viper again.'

'What viper? How long did they stay?'

'Till twelve; then they caught the bus and I toddled up to Amy's with a pudding-bowl of roast potatoes and the rather charming silver spoons Gina's given me, which she says she got from home: I hope with permission!—anyhow, I like them very much. Jo says he'll send me some rations, because he'll visit the chap at the Royalty Club, who's a good friend of his, so I'm waiting to see what spoil will be looted from the poor peers, and field marshals. Gina's coming on Saturday, so this week's work will consist of one day. Do you think I'm turning my room into a lost dog's home? I can't quite make out what I think of the whole situation.'

I was wondering if the interest it gave him could possibly balance the loss, when he said, 'I think I really rather like it, as long as others are not invited in turn to pay me these late surprise visits. It only wanted my conventional relatives, or even Amy, to turn up this morning and find us all lying in heaps at 11 o'clock. But now they've all gone, and I've escaped being bright at Amy's tea-party—I just

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went by, I feel consoled and amused by those peculiar few hours, but perhaps this is all rather incoherent chatter. How much is a pony, Sydney?"

'I'm not sure, £50 I think. Why?'

'Gina says I'm not to leave my gold box about, sooner or later she'll take it and make off. She says it's worth a pony, and I don't know *what* people are like! I'm not to leave it here when Jo comes again.'

'And will you?'

'O yes, I'm purposely leaving it here,' and he gently fingered it.

'But, Merton, has the gold box the most glitter? If you're reforming by trust, perhaps you should add your Boucheron cuff links, don't you think? Or are you going to graduate the temptations?'

Within a few days he asked me if he might bring Gina and Jo to tea; as he was unwell I dissuaded him from coming so far, and the two young people came alone. Snub-nosed Jo was employed on war-damage repairs, and he readily talked of his cleverness in doing nothing and stealing much. 'That was a stroke, if only it'd bin one or two thou'; but we parcelled out about twenty quid each!' He told me he was working at 'The Elephant and Castle', and Gina remarked, 'It's nice around the Elephant', and made no further comment, but looked with admiration at her friend, while she flourished cigarettes many at a time in a long flat case, and shyness compelled her to make corkscrew movements with her body, as if she wished to penetrate the floor.

I reflected how removed they were from Merton's world; I could hardly believe in it myself, so

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ephemeral it seemed and so unreal. I remembered Merton's vicarious need for the youth and strength that he himself had missed; it was romantically symbolized in these two 'toughs', and I looked at Gina; physical strength she certainly had, but deep lines and shadows were already decaying her face; and at Jo, so plain, and pink and plump. I wondered again at Merton's feeling for Gina, at the accounts he had given me of his jealousy of Jo, and I conjectured how long it would last. I realized in Gina, as she touched the cat, an animal understanding. She would have a cat purring on the hearth however dislocated her human relationships might be. I smiled a little at all the 'cleverness', easing the weight of being the hostess; Merton would wish to talk about them, to hear my opinions and speculations.

When Austin returned I reminded him during supper of this odd visit, and he vaguely said 'O yes' for he was far away, but later he asked,

'Those two, when are they coming?'

'Yesterday: Gina's friend talked about stealing, to brighten himself and the afternoon.'

'Did they stop too long?'

'No, they were nice in a way—trying to entertain.'

'Gina doesn't seem a bad girl—rather stupid. She looks a bit sly.'

'I know; but when we're nervous of people, don't we all look too sly, or too critical or something?'

'O well, I've hardly seen her. She would be quite good looking if she'd hold up her head.'

'If she's much at Merton's, we'll all become more

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used to each other, then I think she will. I wonder what goes on in it.'

'Shyness doesn't always conceal something interesting.'

'But one feels clumsy when causing it, especially with the young.'

'She isn't young.'

Merton assumed that I would share his interests, and I was asked to meet his friends. Occasionally he had persuaded me 'for fun' to visit his near neighbours; women he had met at Amy Wellington-Jones's house, whose husbands never appeared, being dead or in the City. Their black-beamed houses were filled with furniture as glittering as their cars; the loose-covered chairs danced in their frills on the muffled floor, as we drank our glass of gin. Soon I refused the doubtful amusement of these visits, when I felt my presence was sanctioning them; it was as if a schoolboy were taking his favourite aunt to visit the staff; to show her off, and afterwards to unite with her in deriding them.

THERE were occasional times when Gina was staying at Fox's Mill Cottage, when she would come to Deer's Farm with a message, to collect a book, or perhaps a few vegetables. She usually brought a neighbour's large dog, and I noticed again how good she was with animals. When we were at home she would stay for a while, talking of her life, or arguing about Fascism: she was an ardent believer, but her remarks were adumbrations of false statements, and these annoyed Merton, and he asked me to discourage Gina's Fascist interest and any further talk about it. He was distressed and uneasy about her, and wrote that he had been so dissipated and diffused lately, that he must brood and dwell on his new poem in a lean and lonely period. I was glad of this and replied at once to encourage this intention. I was deeply concerned about him; he looked so pale and sad.

During the following week I asked Amy to lunch, and as we lingered over coffee, we gathered from her that Merton looked very unwell; 'But the girl Gina has been there helping Ivor.' She apparently noticed little and could tell less. While Austin was walking across the meadow to direct her to a foot-path home, I was in the bathroom, when an excited voice from the air called 'Sydney'. I was surprised with the timbre of my reply, 'Merton', full and delighted, as I ran down the stairs to find him.

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‘Have you had the peaceful time?’

‘So far from having the peaceful lonely time I’ve had Gina from Saturday till this morning, and there’ve been such mental upse’s and turmoils and difficulties that I now feel that I’ve been smacked all over. However, I suppose it’s all my fault. I seem built to make human contacts go wrong. All last week, before Gina came, I worked rather well and felt contented and unfussed. Of course, there’s loneliness as well, in seeing no one, and having no one to talk to, and I don’t know how long that sort of life is good for one: but also I don’t know if it’s a good thing for you and me to go on seeing each other. We talk and amuse each other, and the hours go quickly and very pleasantly, but surely underneath there’s something deeply unsatisfactory. Do you agree with this, or do you think I’m making difficulties and trying to tidy everything up more than it ever *can* be tidied up? I feel it’s impossible to ignore the something wrong in the relationship. It only stores up a whole pile of misunderstandings and resentments. Tell me what you think about all this?’


‘I wonder why you came here then. *I* feel no resentments, and know of no misunderstandings.’

‘I lay down no laws about seeing or not seeing each other. As you must obviously know I have enjoyed picnicking and talking and all the things we have done together *very much indeed*, and should miss them if they should stop.’

‘Then why do you punish yourself? Haven’t we laughed together, haven’t we shared things—joys

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and despairs? Nearly a generation divides us, but isn't that filled with learning and amusement—and with a kind of celebration? All this may be amorphous, perhaps hazardous, but the uncertainty alone makes it real. But you must bully and stabilize your doubts, and you *force* me to speak like this; you've no faith, no faith, yet you come here and come here. . . .' But I knew that he was worn out with his complications with Gina, flinging everything away with his troubles. He was not having the quiet time that his health needed, he was risking his delicate life in drinking and violent scenes. But I thought it unfair that I should be made a victim of these upsets, that *our* relationship should either have to be perfect or continually attacked. It was capricious and tiresome and I warmly told him so. He turned away, and surprised me by replying very gently, 'You must excuse lots of things, awkwardness, muddled statements and thinking, and you *must* know that any presumptions or conceits are not intentional but just due to ineptitude. I'm not at all in the mood for clear thinking, more than ever like a bean on a drum!'

Saying goodbye near the gate, Merton sat on his bicycle, with a foot on a bank beneath a dark hedge; he turned his face to it, to almost whisper, as he was ready to go, to escape, 'You mustn't laugh at me, there are really several difficulties; to begin with although you may smile, I loathe and hate being thought even a pseudo-snake-in-the-grass by Austin. It's so un-me, so nothing to do with me. This is nobody's fault but I hate it.' 

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I looked at him amazed, for these adolescent words seemed without discretion, insight or values. I thought his sensibilities were being vitiated and debased. Austin may have shown impatience with Merton's excitable social chatter; I regretted that Merton had noticed these minor irritations. I looked at this slender person dressed in green, astride a bicycle, and swimming to my mind came 'monkey-on-a-stick' and 'whipper-snapper', a word I never use, and I was silent.

He continued, 'Then there are upsets and differences of opinion. I will not deny that I find these terribly difficult to deal with. Nothing in Heaven or earth will ever smooth them out or make them right. . . . *I have told Gina to go to Hell, I can't stand it any longer.*'

'Ah . . . and you want me to join her there, you're making an *extraordinary* confusion of me with Gina. I'm not Gina, I am nothing to do with Gina.'

I looked at the side of his worn old-young face, at its strange colour. I thought of the 'upsets' he spoke of. Who was it who lived in a climate of tempests? It was Merton, not I. Who lately in Sheepcote Park, scarlet with rage and with angry tears, had stamped his feet like a child, for the simple reason that I would not return to tea with him? Then I remembered another day, finding him lying so ill, trying to stroke the pain from the back of his head, bathing his face, and when I had to go, how his face had crumpled, and he had sobbed that he could not be alone, that I must remain, nearly

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breaking my heart with compassion. And how I had stayed for a while, leaving him quiet and at peace. I thought of these times and of others, and I spoke to him gently, trying to reassure him.

When he had gone I pondered his words, and wrote him a letter as to someone much younger than Merton, explaining his mistakes in such a way that I hoped would not add to his fears and his troubles. I endorsed his suggestion that we should not meet, but left it in his hands if he should change his mind. I wrote all I could to encourage him to work and to believe in it.

Within a day or two he telephoned. I was moved by the emotion in his voice, by his urgency to see me. I felt I had a trusting friend.

When we met he said in a child's pretending way, 'If my voice sounded odd on the telephone, it was because Amy was downstairs and I thought she might hear me.'

I had clearly shown my affection for Merton, I had told him in words when he had doubted me. I wanted his trust; I asked him to talk about the contents of my letter, I needed assurance that he had fully understood, and he replied,

'I can't, for in those ways you are far more developed than I.'

'I don't want upsets.'

'Are you disappointed?'

'Disappointed?'

'Disappointed in me?'

'Merton, you asked me that before—— No, not in you, but in the situations you create. Can you

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never accept anything? Isn't it comparatively simple? I don't see why you shouldn't care for me—that's not conceit; and I certainly don't see why I shouldn't care for you. Why should you be so full of doubts about your feelings for me, and of mine for you?

'That's quite different——'

'Why?'

'You're *noble*—that's what I felt about Charles.'

'O Merton darling, aren't we all noble as well as other things? You're noble, and I admire you enormously; noble and courageous and gifted. I wish I were related to you; your aunt or something; sometimes lately you've made me feel so terribly cut off; alternately on a pinnacle, or dust and ashes. I should prefer to be a nice plump second cousin, steady in the background. Something you could utterly rely on, but not expect to be perfect; I might fulfil that, but I cannot be so noble or so nothing. Darling, you have a grief that cannot be cured, but it can be alleviated; not by these horrible upsets with Gina, nor with the bouts of drink—these simply make you wretched and ill, and most terribly dislocated—and suspicious.' He looked clear and tender as he readily agreed with me, and we talked of other things. He told me he had been correcting proofs, and writing again, and soon he felt he would be steeped in his past writings and in his future ones.

A crisis for him was over.

I WAS alone at Deer's Farm when in the early morning, one of the first flying bombs fell in a field nearby. It felt as if a giant had suddenly rushed through the house. I opened my eyes to see my curtains horizontally stretched from the window, while my long mirror danced merrily on the floor. I ran to steady it, then I wandered through the house. I had carefully left all the windows and doors unfastened, so there was little shattering of glass, but all had burst open; it looked like a hasty departure, leaving the house untidy, lonely and bereft. I wandered outside in the silver and gold of the early June morning; with bare feet I felt the cool lawn, and in the meadow I pushed through the long grasses. I wandered and drank the quietness, the absolute serenity. I walked to the back of the only house in sight; it was standing white, reserved and quiet. Only later I learnt that inside the ceilings were down, and in front the tiles were blown from the roof. All humans seemed far away, only the birds and the ground were awakening. I slowly walked back, lay down on my bed, and immediately fell asleep. It was 8 o'clock when I awoke; I hurriedly dressed, drank some coffee, and walked to a cottage in another direction. I wanted to talk to some friends; an air force ace, his wife and child lived there. I had been with them the evening before,

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and they had spoken with great affection of the place. The cottage looked calm and as usual, but on the door was pinned a hurriedly written direction:

‘No more milk till further notice

No more bread „ „ „

Already they had escaped in their car: it frightened me.

There was a night of quiet, and then the flying bombs came, many of them trundling and spluttering over the house. Deer’s Farm is on the top of a hill, it jumped, screeched and trembled with the guns. Our daughter, coming from London for a night’s peace, found the bang and clatter greater than in London. After a week or two the noise and lack of sleep affected Austin’s heart and we left at once. A few days later my sister in Cambridge invited Merton to come too. She was a retired doctor, very kind, with a pleasant garden, verandahs, and good food. Merton considered but decided not to come. I suggested a place in Wales where he and Ivor might be; he would not move.

I was concerned that he should remain at Fox’s Mill; ill, sleepless with the noise, and terribly troubled about Gina. I went across London to see him, and to make further arrangements about leaving our house for some time. He told me he was in the park when the most awful barrage went up. He was wandering in the beeches close to the house and ‘I ran to the gazebo where you and I have often sheltered; it was exciting to be there with great lumps of shrapnel falling outside. After they

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had passed, some children by the stream ran up to me and said "Look, look, it's still hot", and held up jagged fragments like horrible fingers. The violence of the doodlebugs has made rather a good excuse for writing to Gina to enquire if she's still alive—is it weak-minded of me to take it?"

'I don't know—perhaps wait——'

'I'm tired of being dumb, it's not my nature; I have written and sealed, but not posted it; it may never go.'

And he told me of an amusing new friend he had made by the river, 'I came rather suddenly round a bush, and there was a young man with no clothes on at all, so we got talking about the coldness of the water and then I spread my picnic and shared it with him. He has gold hair, and very white city skin, because he works in a shop in Oxford Street. His name is Ted Bird. What seemed to cement the whole meeting was the interesting fact that Charles Essex had been his doctor when he had had a very difficult time and nearly died. You can guess that I rather cross-questioned him, and found that he too found Charles the best doctor he'd ever known.'

'And did he come back with you?'

'After all this I had to ask him to tea; then we walked in the wood and drank beer, then we came back and drank soup, and I lent him my book. He opened it, then shut it quickly and said, "I'm going to like this." '

'Where does he live?'

'He stays with his grandmother who's seventy-five and very charming. He told me how on her marriage

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day she and her husband only had sixpence between them; but they never looked back and started selling fruit and vegetables and anything else they could grow or find. On cold days they'd go into a pub and order whisky, crushed sugar, lemon and boiling water, price twopence each. Ted's been a houseman, he's trained, I think he'd do it well.'

'O—and you liked him?'

'He's nice—he's coming next weekend.'

'You look *much* better.'

'My legs are brown too, because I've been wearing shorts. Ted wants to wear kilts, but is deterred by the fact that there are no pockets, and one has to wear one of those funny sporrans. I said: "Have a leather wallet."'

After a pause, I said,

'And your poem'

'The proofs are pouring in and I hate it as I read it. I've turned against it, I hope it's chiefly boredom. I'm ploughing on with the new one fairly well. Thank Heaven! after that very *very* hopeless feeling period about Gina.'

'That's over now——'

A flying bomb 'cut out' over the cottage. We waited. I saw Merton's face held, change to a deeper colour; the bomb meandered on, came to earth; the cottage jumped and shuddered, and we breathed freely again, while Merton continued his conversation.

'Ivor's new theory is that a girl may one day dominate me and give me Hell.'

'What nonsense; can you sleep with all this bomb racket?'

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'The noise is the worst part, there seem to be guns all round, and we're powdered with shrapnel. I shan't go away, unless I'm blown away; I sometimes feel a little anxious—may Ivor and I go to Deer's Farm for a change, it might be necessary, for we've been dotted all round with spookies. Amy says she'll leave if it goes on. It really is too much sometimes. She sleeps in her drawing room, hemmed around by tables, with her A.R.P. tin hat on the side of her head. Mildred Clough doesn't seem to take any notice. But, Sydney, if we go to Deer's Farm, I'll *promise* not to read any correspondence, open any drawers, cupboards, boxes; you won't be alarmed, will you, imagining that I'm ferreting in every corner? I've grown strangely conventional in these respects now, I think.'

I laughed and said that I had carefully locked up my note-books, and Austin had put all his papers away.

We were untroubled when later at the station a flying bomb rattled over the train as it moved away, leaving him a slender figure, isolated on the cool, dark platform; I could distinguish his hair halo-ing his animated face, and a bright handkerchief fluttering a goodbye to me in the dim unlighted train.

Ted Bird was not by the river during the following weekend, and Merton posted his letter to Gina. The many letters to me, the expensive telephone calls, the urgency that I should go and stay displayed his loneliness and strain. For several days he had no reply from Gina, and again and again he

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asked my advice—should he telephone Gina's landlady, or her father? Must he accept the peculiarity of Gina's temperament, and the fact that she was compelled to kick off and out from everyone? Should he take no notice of her extraordinary changes of mood? Was it right, he asked, that he should exert his will or leave it all in Fate's hands? Was it all hopeless and should he just leave it? for no one could have made himself clearer than he had done. Would I come soon, for he felt bound to say that he was very *very* unhappy.

I knew the deep despair that lurked in Merton's nature: in the loneliness of the moment, a frustration of this kind might overwhelm him. Austin was concerned that I should go across London and through the area of bombs, but I made plain to him my greater anxiety, and wrote to Merton that I was coming in a day or two, and was making my arrangements to go, when he telephoned to say that he had become so incredibly gloomy that he had telephoned Gina's landlady; there was no reply: he tried again; the same thing: then he rang Gina's father; he was out. I could guess, he said, how frustrated he was by then, and he went to bed in a terrible suicidal mood. There at breakfast in the morning was a letter from Gina. It had had a curious effect on him, like a shock. Gina's house had been bombed, at first she had thought with her friend Jo in it, but luckily he was out. It was a good letter, Merton said, but with no mention of seeing him again. But now would I tell him? Had he done something *utterly* foolish. He was so dislocated, what

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with relief and pleasure in getting the letter, and he was longing to see Gina again, that he had asked her to come this weekend, and had sent her a pound for her train fare. Did I think this an enormity? Would she throw it at him? He was tormented by all these thoughts now that he had done it. And yet did I not think there was some sense in what he had done, for Gina was short of money and he was not so short. 'I want to see her and if I ask in that way, surely I should make it as easy as possible?'

I replied that under the circumstances it seemed sensible enough, but would not Ted Bird be coming at the same time? But he could not think of the weekend, nor could he think of anything else, so I said goodbye, remarking that I would be seeing him soon, and reminding him to take care of himself, and to telephone me at any time. He added that he and Ivor had just come back from Sheepcote Park, where a 'bug' had landed *just exactly* where he and I had lunched a short time ago.

Soon there was a letter to say that Gina was staying with them for a week, and he asked if he and Gina might go to Deer's Farm, where they would absolutely promise not to touch or disturb at all, but just rest and have a change of scene for an hour or two. I was amused with his repeated assurances of curbed curiosity! He apologized for his 'very bad' letter, but he found it difficult to think at all with Gina there, and the wireless booming away on the Forces Programme.

A few days passed before I heard again, when he wrote that both Gina and Ted Bird were with him,

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talking as he wrote to me. The last week had been such a complete change for him that he no longer felt like himself at all, so that it was stimulating to hear from me that several people in Cambridge had mentioned his poems; it made him remember what he thought of and tried to do when he was himself and alone. He had felt that writing was quite dead and unreal, but after having the 'butter' that I had handed out to him, he had gone away alone, up the hill in the heather and the bracken. While coming back and eating cherries as he wandered, he had tried to recover his identity, or the valuable bit of it that seemed to have flown away. Then he asked if he and Gina went to Deer's Farm, had supper there, and became benighted, might they roll up on the music room divan? They were toying with the idea of a night in new surroundings and all alone, which would have the double advantage of giving Ivor a respite and allowing them to escape from him for a while. He added that Gina was perfect in the house, and he would give absolute guarantee that there would be no boozings, bangings, prying or breakages. I could be sure of that.

I telephoned, sending my love and assuring him that Deer's Farm though pleasant was neither full of treasures nor of secrets, and that both Austin and I would be very pleased for them to stay there. (They remained there for several weeks.)

Merton wrote from Deer's Farm of their happiness there. Ted Bird had turned up on the first evening, just as he was re-heating the chicken, which Ivor had cooked and stuffed with Amy's

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herbs. Ted came armed with a bunch of roses and a bag of gooseberries, which had amused Gina and Merton respectively. And Ted had become the perfect valet-houseman, arranging the flowers and taking everything in hand. But after supper he had asked if he might curl up in one of the armchairs as he did not 'fancy' the ride home that night. Poor Merton was hoping and hoping that he would go for he wanted, he wrote, to be alone at Deer's Farm with Gina. But of course Ted stayed and did all the housework very well and officiously the next day, and before he left he said longingly, 'I do hope your friend lends you her house again.' He had seemed quite entranced. He had slept in the living room on the couch we had put there. Merton wrote that he and Gina quite shamelessly used my bed, and did I mind? He had wondered and wondered before deciding, but all the other beds were far away from each other and narrower, and now they felt wonderfully safe with the doodles whistling overhead. Did I feel that they were turning Deer's Farm into a bear garden? He hoped not, but had slight qualms about making such complete use of our place. He wanted me to know how much he was loving it there, and he ended 'Sydney, I can't remember ever enjoying myself so much before,' and enclosed were a happy few words from Gina.

When Austin asked 'How's Merton?' I replied, 'They're *very* happy at Deer's Farm,' and he said, 'O good, I'm glad they're enjoying it there.'

I was very contented.

I WENT to see Merton at Deer's Farm and Austin came too. We arranged to spend the night there, and to have supper with a friend who lived nearby. This time it was a comparatively easy journey, for there were few air raids. It was a happy, peaceful day; the sun shone, little clouds drifted across a pale sky, we had our lunch beneath the trees. I saw Merton's contentment, and the simple kindness of Gina.

Before we went out in the evening Austin asked Gina to have a drink at The Plough, and I followed them there. At the door I met Austin who was leaving too soon. Why was he escaping, I wondered, but I went in and sat down with my half-pint at the dark iron-bound mahogany table, feeling puzzled, when Gina suddenly began to speak in a curious whining voice, curling her thin lips, 'I'm going, Merton *makes me sick*,' leaving no doubt of her meaning or intention. These foreboding words used in relation to Merton's poor injured body seemed utterly shocking and cruel and my thoughts swung in loathing from the brutal tone of the banal remarks to pity of the distress which occasioned them; they were suspended between and I could not find words, while Gina rambled on about her sexual inclinations, explaining and boasting. . . . I thought of Merton's sensitive nature, and in a flat measured

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voice I made trite remarks about considering more, not leaving at once, and we shambled out of the pub, shamefaced and estranged. 2

Where was Merton's 'happiness'? I blamed him bitterly for his lack of perception. I hated Gina for her coarse treachery: I desperately wanted to be alone.

Merton insisted; he must ride down the hill with me. When would he find the crude reverse side of his friend? Feelings must be stifled, thoughts pushed away, questioning glances ignored. At a bend in the lane, a lorry piled too high with empty fruit boxes swerved towards me, nearly touching me; my front wheel trembled; I glanced at Merton and his face was terrified. Confusion seemed to melt away, compassion flooded over all . . . and here was Austin near our friend's house. Merton turned back, and we smiled and waved as we walked our different ways.

This incident in the inn and others, and years later those of violence and attack, are ringed around and isolated with distaste.

It was late when we returned from our supper visit; only a tiny light was in the hall. Merton and Gina had arranged my room for me, and when there, Austin told me of Gina's outburst to him in The Plough. Quickly Austin had told her to leave Merton if she did not want to stay; and wishing to be rid of the girl and her mad meandering words, he had left at once, not realizing that she would continue the subject with me.

Early in the morning I was awakened by Gina

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bringing in my breakfast; with a flourish of her strong arms, and several deep bows with her head, she neatly placed the tray on the table by my side. I thanked her, she smiled with a shy kindness and gyrated towards the door and around it. Poor Gina.

The incident of the day before tormented me.

I found Merton up unusually early and resting on a camp bed beneath the walnut tree. I decided to say goodbye, after giving him an account of our supper party. Troublesome things would sort themselves out in my absence. There seemed to be nothing that I could do. Fingering the lid of a Chinese teapot, taking it on and off, he said how much he had enjoyed the day before, and he only hoped we had too, for now we must return in all the turmoil. I was wondering if he referred to bombs or to uneasy emotions, while Merton looked away, far over his shoulder, to continue, 'When I got back last night there was Gina in a stuck-pig mood, just standing blackly on the balcony not uttering a word. I saw something was wrong so I made tentative remarks about the day. Supper was awful, so I rudely went out. When I returned I wasn't at all in a sensible state of mind, and then, of course, she told me how she'd been talking to you in the pub.'

'And what did she say?'

'Every word, she told me every word! I yelled to her to shut up, and that I'd heard it all before. I asked her what she was doing here, if that was how she felt. She said that you must think her treacherous, that she was treacherous, but she wouldn't be again. I began cursing her and trying to chuck her

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out of the room. It was horrible. Sydney, you've no idea of all the ideas you've given her by talking to her like that.'

'Talking to her, what do you mean? Look this way, not at the trees,' and he turned towards me a scarlet confused face.

'You told her if she wants to break off, she must do it gently; so she had to fly at me saying it couldn't go on, she was only making use of me—then comes the contradiction. She's without any reticence with me—absolutely none.'

'And has she with others? Lord, how I hate all this sort of thing.'

'Anything another person said about me, she'd tell me, even though it was terribly unsuitable and hurting. I had hoped when you spoke to her that you'd point out all you thought good or worthwhile in me, if you think anything is, and especially what you thought good or worthwhile in me for her.'

'But I was astonished—pained into reserve—nor have I considered whether you are "good" for her.'

'I've no intention of allowing her to break away, either quickly or slowly; she couldn't possibly do either, while I'm in this state of mind. This isn't arrogant, it's simply true. I should make sure that we didn't lose touch. Couldn't you have told her that nothing but good could come from her being with me? Instead of allowing her to ramble on and wallow in her particular fancies of the moment. She can have these, I'm not interfering. I'm continually being told how her love is less than mine, and *quite* different.'

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I was silent. Merton glanced at me and continued, 'Words have become meaningless, and I've stopped taking any notice of them. I'm perfectly contented to be with her, as I have been lately with no wrangling or probing, but it was terribly damaging to have it all raked over yesterday night. If you ever talk to her again, would you just accept the situation that we're friends and intend to remain so, if that's doubtful I shall have all this poured over me again, and I do loathe it.'

'But, Merton, I had accepted the situation of your friendship with Gina and lately with pleasure. The talk in the pub wasn't of *my* making, it was a painful surprise. I don't understand the account given to you by your friend—it all seems miserable, horrible.'

'I've absolutely no illusions about her attachment to me, nor am I too silly to realize how very hazardous the whole set-up is. I know something about Gina's character and past, and have expected more trouble than there's been. Do I seem as if I'm still in a state, because I'm not, and I'm not asking you never to speak to Gina again, I must warn you though I'll hear all about it afterwards—difficult unless one's careful.'

'Don't talk *at* me like that! I've had no conversation with Gina that I should mind being repeated to you, nor shall I. You seem to be blaming me for being caught, and then not singing your praises to her! No, Merton, surely to understand the meaning and intention of a conversation is delicate and difficult; to repeat it to the subject of it is absolutely

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hazardous. Gina seems to have caused an awful confusion, without that conscious intention perhaps. I was *forced* to be the most unwilling listener to her rambling words. There was a predicament in the pub; I had to make some reply, and made as little as possible. I'm weary of it all, and rather wretched. I don't feel able to deal with this sort of thing nor clever enough to avoid it—it'll all go on and on and on. . . .'

'I hope I don't sound too upset, I'm not, I'm only upset by its unforeseen effect. I *know* you said nothing that should be regretted at all.'

I made no reply and he said,

'It's really so lovely here. We *are* grateful. I don't want to talk any more about Gina's character,' and he continued to tell me how they had been into the pilot's cottage, sat in the living room smoking his cigarettes and looking at his books. Then they went on to another house, and Gina was unrestrainable and burglariously opened the dining-room window, got in and went all over it. They found a wood carving in the maid's wardrobe; it was a man and woman kissing each other.

He told me how a flying bomb was turning over and over and nearly descended on the house, and how Gina saw it and yelled to him to fall flat; when he did, Gina rushed in and fell flat on top of him. Then there was the explosion; it had glided some fields away. Then a neighbour had called; they were so late up that she caught them looking horribly frowsty after their breakfast, and she looked as if she had seen more than she was intended to! What

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story did I think she would have for the neighbourhood? He and Gina had laughed and laughed afterwards, but he hoped they were not giving Deer's Farm a lurid reputation. He said, 'I'm chattering on, I'm afraid; it's no good telling me to begin working again, since I can't even get myself together properly for a conversation, all is muddled and floating and not here. But I do hope I'm not giving the impression of being in too much of a state. I have been, but I'm not any longer. I felt perhaps you were trying to protect me, when last night we were biking down the hill, from Gina's changeableness and bald statements of how she feels. Although it may be a mistake, she has often told me all and more than she told you in the pub, so I'm used to it. But what makes it more complicated is that she takes it back later when she again feels in tune with me. Both seem to me exaggerations of different sides of her character, and I think gradually she'll just have to trust me and not swing about so. At present she doesn't. She can't think what I'm up to. She thinks I'm a capricious person who wants his own way and she's afraid. Do you think I *am* terribly possessive with her? I've a determination about her which is perhaps too strong, but I think that because of this I can be of great use to her. I think she needs a different sort of life to the life she's led up to now; she doesn't altogether like the change and that's when she turns against me and tries to throw everything off.'

I suggested that these upsets might be fewer, if he thought of other things, and it was work that would

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help him to do that, and he replied, 'You're quite right about work, if I'm good for *anything*, that is the thing; but the long time with Gina has been so unplanned and so unexpected, that I've just given myself up to it without thought.' 'And I told him of the praise I had heard of his work, I told him again and again; I reminded him of the firm belief he himself had in it.

'It's true, I suppose, that Gina in some way does destroy my urge to work, especially when she's out of sympathy with me. Living like this now, I don't realize things as I do when I'm alone, and because she does not comprehend a part of me it seems to hide away and lose importance in my own eyes.'

'It's there—waiting, don't leave it for too long.'

'Yes, I know it would be a stupid life for me to go on indefinitely doing nothing. Sydney, I'm sorry if before I seemed to be blaming you. The truth is that I'm so terribly conscious of difficulties and dampers that I feel that everything's out to trip me up. It would probably have been most unwise and unsuitable to have launched into praise of me!'

'She seemed so completely—estranged.'

'When she turns on me and destroys my confidence, then I wish that you'd bolster me up. I never for a moment thought that you said anything intended to stir her up, but knowing her I felt that even a mildly heart to heart talk disturbs and muddles her in a way that would never occur to you or me.'

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‘But I never indulged in any “heart to heart talk”. I do wish you could understand how wildly distorted this all seems to me!’

‘But, Sydney, the change in her last night was extraordinary. It was as if she were trying to reason out things that shouldn’t be reasoned out. I see I mustn’t ever dissect or probe about unless I want trouble. She can’t deal with it and has “to pay me out” for it. Now no more about Gina.’

I said that it would be wisest to neglect the incident, and if unpleasant surprises happened again I was more prepared for them.

An old black-skirted woman, he told me, had been peering at them through the hedge. She had not stirred when he had moved towards her; he disliked it very much, it was sinister; he had seen her several times, peering, watching them, and he thought she was standing there now. This tale reminded me of others; of people, he would say, who lurked near his cottage, in the day or at night, listening and peering. This old woman who stood by the hedge was very nearly blind. She was living in a home for old people, and would stop for a while in her walks, waiting, enclosed in the past, hoping perhaps, for an interest away from it, before returning for a meal or for bed. Sometimes Merton gave people, things, or the environment a ghostliness and terror, and I felt how unbearably alarming everything might become unless one kept one’s head or admitted all into one’s heart. I suggested that we might walk by the footpath and speak to her, and go further to look over an empty farm house in the

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valley. She was nowhere to be seen, and we followed the path shaded by a high hedge which opened into a wide and sunny lane leading down to the house. We went in through the back door, over the cool flagged kitchen and into all the rooms. Merton had wanted for some time to leave his small cottage, for he imagined the owners at the big house nearby were 'lurking and peering', and soon they would tell him to go; this lurking and fear of dismissal was a refrain that repeated itself again and again.

'I do wish this time,' he said as we slowly returned up the hill, 'in spite of difficulties, was not coming to an end. I've really loved it, and it's been different from anything else in my life. If we had not had Deer's Farm to come to, it couldn't have been half so pleasant. Both Gina and I realize that very clearly and we'll never forget. But I'm sorry I spoke at all when Gina upset me so. I had just meant to say how much I'd enjoyed seeing you—but I terribly wanted a champion. I realize now it wasn't the moment to paint a rosy picture of me! She was terrified last night that you and Austin would think she was snugly in my pocket.'

'And I suppose she hoped to counteract the impression as well as possible.'

'Yes, and I think from all this, one thing is quite clear; we should be as untroubled and unfussed as possible by what she says and does.' (I reflected that saying and doing were very important elements in a human being.) 'I should never have taken any notice last night.'

'And instead you became excited, extremely

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insistent and questioning, *willing* that you must know.'

'Instead of just allowing the glumness to float away. I'm glad in a way it's all come out though, else I feel you'd perhaps be trying to protect me from what you'd think I didn't know. But do you think I do look as if I owned Gina when I'm with her?'

I had to admit that in the past he had certainly looked the owner, and I remembered how Merton had given me that impression with regard to myself. He had proudly shown me to others, when I had met his friends, or had accompanied him on visits to his neighbours.

I was grateful when he said again, 'Now no more about Gina,' and he talked of other things, gaily, trying to reassure me before Austin and I returned to Cambridge.

THE weeks of summer went by. Merton frequently wrote or telephoned; Gina was going, Gina was staying on; then, Gina was staying on still longer for Merton's new friend Clifford and his younger companion David were going to camp in Amy's garden. Amy would like this, he wrote, being surrounded with 'boys', and Clifford she had already approved, a handsome, evasive middle-aged man, with dyed golden hair or was its colour a natural one untouched by age? Merton was hoping he would come in the camping outfit that would be the natural development of his usual dress: tassels and bells, cliffon flags hanging from the corners of the tent, and inside, incense burners and artificial water lilies floating in black bowls, and with all the 'doodlebugs' buzzing overhead. They were returning to Fox's Mill Cottage, near Amy's garden, to be all together there, so that Gina could meet them.

I had of course accounts of this visit. How Clifford had become very tactful towards Merton and Gina, leaving them alone, and refraining from mentioning Gina, though Merton continually spoke of her to Clifford. This reserved and guarded attitude caused Gina to conjecture that Clifford, hoping to share a home with Merton, found she was in his way, but I thought it more probable that he

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regretted Gina's lack of culture or belief in it. Indeed, Merton told me that Clifford had confided in Amy this wish, that Gina was interested in writing or music, so that Merton should not waste his talents and health as he was so obviously doing now. But Amy had rejoiced that Merton had found someone 'who could help to look after him, and Gina is a fine-looking girl, I like her very much, she must sit for me to paint her'. This rapid change of attitude from frowns to approval led to Merton's and Gina's suspicion that she 'lusted' for the silver spoons that belonged to Gina's father, 'such delicate shapes', she had lovingly said. But this was not so; her sympathy was real. She saw only Merton's delight in Gina's company; she knew the importance of 'living', and it was easy for her to tolerate the waste of talent and spirit for she had little interest in Merton's creative work, or knowledge of his emotional condition, while she had much in the light social activity that played around her. And in a peculiar way, Merton said, he enjoyed the difficulties and upsets of Clifford's and David's presence, for it made Gina and himself seem like host and hostess to some strange visitors: they talked about them and discussed them in every way before they went to sleep.

Though the flying bombs were rumbling along, and exploding with shudderings and bangs, it was comparatively quiet now; a balloon barrage was pimpling the sky, and there were no attacking guns or planes.

At Deer's Farm where Austin and I had returned

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for two or three days all was bright and yellowed with the sun, a lovely desert. The music room had at one time been a dairy which we had enlarged to take the piano and the easel. Now, before the night we were changing things around to make more room for our beds there. It seemed safer downstairs under the light music-room roof than in other parts of the house where heavier timbers or stone might fall. The 'V2s' had started, and already one had fallen in a field nearby, which had blown everything from the shelves to the floor, and this happened again later—the terrific shudderings and the following strange silence; there was disorder in the room, nothing worse, and we soon fell asleep again. Sometimes insomnia can torment one, but I found I could sleep soundly with this menace; it seemed an intolerable disturbance beyond one's control, and sleep came as the only solution to black it out.

In the afternoon, in the sweltering heat, Merton arrived, dressed in sandals, shorts and green-yellow shirt; all yellows and browns, including his skin, like the meadow beyond. We all talked at once. Merton and I left the music room for the shade of the mulberry tree. We picked the fruit and the blood-red juice flowed down our arms, dripping from our elbows as Merton said, 'Gina's gone at last. I saw her into the bus and she said "Shall I write and thank Sydney for letting us stay at Deer's Farm?"'

'—and you said?'

' "If you feel like it", in a vague tone of voice for fear of setting up any reaction. If she does could

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you answer and say any little reassuring thing you can about me?"

'What do you want me to say?'

'She's so unnecessarily puzzled and distrustful of my motives (as she is of everybody else's) that she really needs to be told that many people are as simple as they seem and are in no way bent on capture or highway robbery!'

'Why is she so suspicious?'

'It's her knockabout aimless life; she has so much useless cynicism and disbelief that she can't enjoy the most straightforward things. In a bad mood, everything that's said to her is suspect.'

'And of course any words of mine would be, don't you think?'

'It's all so odd that I accept it now and hope that where I'm concerned at least it will gradually fade away. I don't want my own way with her, I don't want to swallow her alive—*do* please tell her this if her letter throws any doubt on the subject.'

'What *do* you want?'

'What I *do* want is to look after her, and to make her life as pleasant as possible. This may be considered domination of the worst kind, but I can't help that. It's so obvious that she looks miles better through staying with me. You've said it, Amy's said it, and Ivor has. Three *very* different persons! In her own way she's in an even more peculiar state of health than I am, and she'll just go and die drunk in a ditch if no one pulls her out.'

'And what does Gina say?'

'She says that I'm selfish and pleasing no one but

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myself with my mission work, and I suppose she's right; it comes quite naturally to me and I don't question it for a moment. I answer perfectly to the quiet submerged, almost lost side of her nature, I don't answer at all to many other sides: but then neither does she to many sides of mine. This doesn't worry me. I would like to share some more than I do, but I can't. One just accepts it. Gina really is happy with me when she isn't frightened of me, and she so often gets frightened for *no* reason. How can I stop her going with all the boys and girls in the world, if she chooses to have them? I could not even stop her from drinking or leading a senseless destructive life, although here I would not be quite so powerless to interfere as in her emotional life.'

I suggested that it was all her emotional life, and asked how Ivor was now that they were alone again.

'He's quite recovered his temper. Gina says she likes his cooking much better than she likes Amy's, and she thinks that men look after a house much better than women!' I wondered for how long Merton would be obsessed, and whether so many emotional episodes were to be regretted, or were necessary for his nature, while he continued,

'I should really love to find a cottage so that Gina and I could live together, and Ivor would look after it. Is this pure madness, do you think? Do you think I would do no work? for I realize I *must* work.'

'Well, would you? How can you write now with no solitude, and so much emotional upset?'

'Work is really what I'm made for. I get back to it

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easily though, as I did after Gina had gone this morning. I feel that things in the past may have forced me into more working than living; now that Gina has gone I shall work again—I really *long* to get back to it. But Gina is extraordinary with me, utterly in sympathy, then suddenly she forgets me—or turns against me. She finds mushrooms, or wood for a fire—she makes fires *wonderfully!*

‘You speak like a lover.’

‘That’s all over now.’

In a day or two I was packing some fruit to take back to Cambridge that evening, when I heard the crunch of a bicycle wheel on the path, and Merton came almost running into the shed, to exclaim, ‘You’ll laugh when I tell you that Gina suddenly reappeared with a suitcase, having “backed out” as she called it from the work for good. I wasn’t well and was in bed. I heard footsteps and looked out of the window and saw her looking very hot, and as if the bloodhounds were after her. She suddenly saw me at the window and said, “Merton, you said I could come back” in a tone of voice as if she expected a denial on my part. She did look funny.’

‘So she’s with you now?’

‘But may we come here for a night or two, when Clifford and David have gone, is that all right?’

I told him we were pleased that they should come, that we were leaving soon, and he said, ‘I thought that here I could really shut myself up in the mornings, while Gina does the household shopping. At Fox’s Mill we are in each other’s laps the whole time—it now works out serenely, but no work is possible,

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unless I throw Gina out in the mornings, when I'm afraid the pub would claim her for its own.'

'Why did she leave the work?'

'She suddenly thought it was all unbearable and left discreetly, and we've got a certificate from the doctor to say that the work's too strenuous for her, and the National Service are going to suggest some other congenial job. Last night Amy asked herself for supper "to christen the new silver" as she put it, those pieces Gina got from her father's flat; she was surprised to see Gina and said in an aside, "Merton, have you got that girl for life?" Isn't she cheeky?'

'Well, have you? I suppose you don't know.'

'I don't know from one day to another, but I dreamt last night that my landladies gave me notice because I didn't lean out of the window when they returned from their W.V.S. work. Is this prophetic? I hope not, awful to be on the street with us all, at this moment!' I asked him what he had been doing before Gina reappeared.

'I was reading your Henry James *Notes on Novelists*, the George Sand bit I like very much. Good I think about her having every sort of emotion for her lovers except respect. I suppose the lack of this causes really more trouble than anything else on earth.' I asked him if it was not time for his new book of poems to appear, and whether he had forgotten all about it, and he replied, 'Yes, almost, but I do want to go on with this third poem. I could work at it quite well if only sharing with Gina were settled, not so much a day to day thing. I shall try

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here, and leave her and the cooking to their own devices. The only trouble is, every type of person feels it an affront to ignore another person's presence, but I'm much better at this kind of privacy in the midst of people than I was.'

He rode down the hill with us to the dilapidated village station. The buzzing fly-bombs made a delicate abstract design as they criss-crossed over the railway lines. None cut out. It seemed as if they were making longer journeys now, falling over, or on the other side of London.

With the interval that followed with our stay at Cambridge and in London, I was glad to have a rest from seeing Merton. He wrote or telephoned. I was aware of the danger to him from the air; I believed there was greater danger from his obsession with Gina. But he must disentangle his feelings and do so alone. After all it was no affair of mine, and if Merton liked to keep me informed of every move, or every possible move, I was ready to be the interested listener, but only the reluctant adviser. And I hoped to find in Gina further qualities that would make her appear a more attractive or distinguished personality. Though her character was frequently and trenchantly discussed by Merton, she still remained where she was, vaporous, unreal, reflecting uneasily the last influence, trying to dispose of the one before; shifting her ground, or holding to it when it was no longer there. And misunderstanding—always misunderstanding. Though she would often complain of other's stupidity, it was then as if she knew her own, and all this with an undeveloped

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notion of honesty, which made her embarrassing and pathetic; it was a matter of manners to overlook this 'honesty', and to relieve her embarrassment by not feeling it oneself, even though the giving of it seemed to be her greatest triumph, the shock tactics that apparently led nowhere. But through the clutter, there would shine sometimes a real warmth of heart, radiating her expression, and for a moment or two she was entirely innocent: one was held, and disarmed.

I imagined them there, in our house and garden, the slender vibrant, terribly delicate Merton; ill or better, without self-pity, forcing, calling to Gina for this innocence and for a communication which at its best could only be an illusion, but one that he could imagine into a deep and simple reality, created by him. In his stubborn way, Merton had determined to love and form her; she was the image that would fill the role of helper and romantic friend. She was found and must be secured.

OUR children were working in bombed London, and irrationally I felt less concern about them, if I sometimes stayed there myself. Cambridge was crowded and too cosy. During one of these visits I was going by bus down Kingsway, and a flying bomb trundling behind cut out. The driver stopped, the four or five people who were inside rushed for shelter. I had just chosen a boarded-up doorway of a shop, when I found myself blown against its splintery wood planks. Some moments or minutes must have passed: there was a strange stillness: I only remember the crunch of broken glass as I, by mistake, walked in the direction of the exploded bomb, half a street away. On the side of the pavement lay a young girl, her face was blue-white, her eyes closed; the pink on her cheeks looked unconnected with her skin. Doll-like and beautiful she lay, very simply, with her hands open by her side, palms upwards, as if they were appealing both to give and to take. I thought she was dead. There were movements in the road, the crackling of glass, and an ambulance drew up, and I turned and walked back through a cordon rope and up Southampton Row. For some reason which I have forgotten, I wanted to send a telegram; in the post office no one was there: there was no one outside; it was a still and empty world. I felt a terror and an unquenchable thirst to

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know that our children were safe; I could not communicate with them. Without feeling nausea, I suddenly vomited into the gutter.

We had arranged to stay with my sister till the autumn, but we began to long for the country again, for Deer's Farm. I was overcome with tiredness after the bombing experience, nevertheless we kept to our arrangement and went there for two or three days in order to return with some fruit. While Austin was hanging the hammock from a small walnut tree Merton arrived, walking uneasily, slightly stumbling through the flowering grasses in the meadow; he called, 'I've just been watching David bathe, he looks unbelievably Jewish with an adolescent moustache like mouse's fur.' I settled in the hammock while they left to get the graceful wooden ladder. Lying there relaxed as the afternoon went by, I could hear their voices in the distance calling, talking, laughing as they picked the ripe fruit in the sun. I was drowsy when I heard Austin saying by my side, 'It's been a *wonderful* afternoon.' I smiled up at him, in tune with his mood: he too had been happy with the imp, god, man, child. 'You stay here, I'll go and get some tea.' Then Merton came, 'It's been good, Austin and I really got on *very* well together. Sydney, I do wish Clifford and David would go. I'm really longing to get back here with Gina, then the thought comes that perhaps I'm too overpowering for her alone—perhaps she likes the others to be around for a change. But they make me go away on my own. I wouldn't have done this a little while ago, but so many

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people at Fox's Mill makes me feel as if nobody's about. I feel unrelated and floating. Everything has risen to a very shallow level.'

'But they're going soon.'

'Yes, I know. It's not only them. I'm really angry that Gina in the pub—Austin's told me—poured that turgid stream over *his* head too! I've been made to look like a deluded disgusting vampire bat!'

'O no, Merton—he enormously enjoyed the afternoon with you, he's just said so.'

'But it's crazy of Gina not to respect the sense of fitness she really has embedded in her.'

'Where is she now?'

'She's gone for a few days, and this morning I lay in bed all alone and I wrote a poem which I didn't like very much even as I was writing it. I thought of the complete break in my life of the last few weeks and I realized that it was a sort of reversion to my childhood life, there we were, eating, quarrelling, discussing, joking, sleeping, idling together—but always the feeling that I ought to be doing something else behind it all, and also the feeling of Gina which was also the feeling of those in the past, that Merton was bent on getting his own way whatever happened—I'm tired of giving that impression. Gina must go if she feels I'm too much for her. I don't say this in a rage, but I won't be considered a bogey that has to be placated or flouted. I really feel that Gina should be very *pleased* to know me, not rather nervous of my imaginary tentacles.'

'Of course—but you're always dissecting her and she knows it.'

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'She does it herself too. She said, "I say shocking things to almost complete strangers because I feel inferior, and I try to cause a sensation to cover it up." This is just what you predicted, isn't it? She said too, "They must think me absolutely batty, especially Austin. Sydney knows most of the things I say don't mean anything even while I'm saying them." I've never had quite such a connected conversation with Gina before. I'm afraid I'm horribly boring and one-track-minded and generally tiresome, but I feel I *have* to talk about her and I can think only fitfully of other things. Now that I have and understand so many ins-and-outs that I didn't before, I feel that I needn't talk about her much more.'

'I think you should allow her to be less noticed, not a peculiar centre of discussion—an oddity, if you really want her to stay with you and be happy—or let her go.'

THAT autumn we returned to Deer's Farm. Merton was there, lingering, all ready to go, to escape, with various objects strung on to his bicycle. Gina was nowhere and I did not ask about her, I only understood later that she had gone again. They had bottled fruit for us, simply pouring boiling water on it; it would not last long, but I was touched and grateful for their kindness. And on the shelves in the shed, apples and pears were neatly arranged, and there were flowers in every room, beautiful bunches pushed into jars. On the hall table was a letter in Merton's handwriting which I began reading; he quickly went outside again and I followed with a cheque that was enclosed, expostulating, returning it while Merton said, 'We've been doing frantic mental arithmetic, trying to find out how much bread and milk and electricity we've used, and then I remembered you once said the rates and taxes came to nearly £1 a week.' 'But you were *guests*.' 'But it's not at all what you'd bargained for; although we shall never be able to repay you and shall *always* and forever be indebted to you for letting us use all your things with such freedom, yet we must be allowed to feel that we're not *too* much of an expense as well. I do want to do a little for my keep. You *must* let me. So please, *please* don't return it. I shall be happy and grateful if you'll let me do this.'

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So we did a little sum for the milk and things and were contented, and wandered round the house from one room to another, pleased with this and that, each room suggesting some comment to Mer-ton. 'I quickly locked your note-book in the china cupboard, so Gina didn't know where it was, so no one has read it. . . . We made up your bed but no other, not knowing what the arrangements will be. Gina wants to know if it's all right, she's taken a suitcase from the attic, she had so much stuff it wouldn't go into her case, which we've left here, full of clothes. . . . Awful to relate your bike's at Fox's Mill Cottage. . . . I asked Ted Bird whose grandmother has such a good garden for all the flowers, aren't they pretty? I just put them in jars. . . . Do say if you discover any particular ravages, it's been such a time I think I must have left horrible messes everywhere . . . I *can't* tell you, I never can tell you, how much we've enjoyed being here—something quite new and delightful for me, I only hope we haven't done little nasty bits of damage.'

'Come again; Austin says, why not stay in the garden room whenever you like?'

'What a lovely suggestion, something to look forward to; but isn't Austin tired of tête-à-tête and beds and suchlike things? though I don't think it will *ever* happen again. I'm afraid I've the feeling that he thinks it's been turned into a madhouse. Do thank him again. I should love to come sometimes *just by myself*.'

'Yes, come by yourself.'

'That's what I should really like, to come by

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myself. . . . The other day I cut Gina's hair and she cut mine—very well. She has also made all the meals while I've been writing or playing your piano. Ambleside watched us from her garden cutting each other's hair and laughing and giggling. I think she disapproved of us, or is this only my imagination? She was raking grass and bending down so that she looked like a hippopotamus. The moon has been so bright that Gina complains that it makes me restless and sexy. I say that it makes me nostalgic, but she sticks to the other word. . . . Ted Bird suddenly appeared for tea, and said he had had a lovely weekend with an American officer in an old inn at Merefield. He wants to know if he can bring the American in to see me at Fox's Mill, as the American when told about my writing was all agog for "cultural interests" (as the Australian fan Chris Reynell put it). We tried to find mushrooms for you, but there was only one.' He sat on the edge of the sitting-room table and said, 'I hung up the mirror again in fear and trembling, to make the room look pretty,' then his eager face was transformed, his eyes enlarged, appealing, serving, as he said very gently, 'You *are* pleased to be back, Sydney?'

'I love it, I'm delighted; and you know how I love to be with you again,' and he moved to the door with his light, half-clumsy walk, saying in a small rusty voice, 'I'll phone you tomorrow,' and was gone.

When I review my life, I sometimes think that the happiest times have been in the country, when it has been filled with friendship, work and solitude.

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Life develops there in a more sensitive rhythm, with less awareness of the terrors and frustrations of time. This rhythm seems more fugitive in a city, where frequent interruptions cut time into smaller fragments, and the fragments do not compose one with another. Nevertheless I have a vivid liking for the swifter movements of life and the interruptions of 'pleasure'. The limitations of the country were never more imposed than in the following months, especially when it was invaded by bombs. And a new scale of values emerged, and an interest and communication between neighbours who, in more normal times, would have remained distant from each other. And from amongst these neighbours was a business man; very close in manner and appearance, who was engaged in some secret government work. For a qualification unknown to me he was called 'Professor', Professor Stoneley Raymond. Tall and white-faced with blue-black hair greying at the temples, he might have been the hero of a nineteenth-century novelette dressed in twentieth-century city clothes, or riding breeches, had he not possessed certain epicene qualities; he could surprise by sensitively realizing an atmosphere, and a temporary emotion would change his face to a blue whiteness, when he would shake and tremble.

He was devoted to his daughter, an elegant school-girl who resembled him, and to her mother, his first wife, whom, we predicted, he would ultimately marry again. His second marriage had been unhappy, and the beautiful girl he was then with was trying to assure herself of his third. He was said to

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be interested in the occult, but I do not remember that he ever discussed those things with us. Had he been wealthy he would have patronized the arts, as it was he had been advised to buy a fine small Picasso, and several lesser works. We liked him, and welcomed the occasional sound of his horse's hoofs (though Gina assured us that he would ruin any horse's mouth, and he certainly remained the urban though enjoying the countryside), or the swift buzzing and abrupt stop of his car.

And during this autumn and winter we borrowed his books, had drinks at the locals, and gossiped about him; he was the mystery man, interested in the arts. And I made some drawings of him, which suggested to Merton that I might do a painting of Gina. I wanted to like Gina; I fastened my mind on to those aspects of her character or appearance that I could appreciate, and I believed, if she lost her fear of me, that I should find more, and I went to Fox's Mill to discuss the painting.

'I couldn't say much on the phone,' Merton said, 'as Gina was at the top of the stairs, and I didn't want to appear to be talking her over with you. However, afterwards I told her what you'd said and then added, "You'd hate to sit for Sydney, wouldn't you?"'

'What did she say?'

' "I wouldn't mind it!" That was surprising to me, and I felt that my wiliness had been really rewarded, for always before so many objections had been made to sitting for Amy. She asked, "Will Austin be there?" and I said, "I don't expect so."

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I said this to make things appear easy. Perhaps you can fix on Austin's London days. She asked if you wanted her to pose naked, and I said, "No, in the red shirt", and she said, "I saw Sydney looking at me and I thought she was thinking there she is in another of Merton's shirts!"'

'Why ever should I mind her wearing your shirts?'

'I said, "She was thinking you looked good in it," was that the right thing to say?'

'She must know that it suits her. Tell her I think it does.'

'If you still feel like doing her, will you write her a little note? She might try to back out of it, when it comes to the point, but try it and see. I told her you'd asked if I'd not have a moment's peace thinking of all her indiscretions, but that made her laugh. She went to her Pa's yesterday for a week. So I don't think I'll go out for a day or two, just lie and write; for I've had some perfectly awful days lately, being sick all day long. I'm much better now, but I'll rest while Gina's away, so can you come over again soon? I'm rather enjoying the queer feeling of being alone again; is it the absence of the necessity to adapt oneself at all? I hope to do a lot of writing. So far I've only tidied up Gina's things, and sent off some awful poems!'

I suggested not coming for a while, but his face became anxious. In a few days I found him fulfilled for he was working again. 7

THE last winter of the war: the long winter evenings shut in with the blackout: in London the bombs and narrow escapes; the crowds in the Underground: the sinister black streets at night, and the aching concern, the deep gnawing in one's heart for those one loved best. From our back room we could hear the wailing of the children from the hospital, sometimes wailing and screaming half through the night as the sirens screamed their message too. •

The snow and ice in the country, and the darkness without a glimmer of light from a house or a cottage as I rode in the evening from Fox's Mill. There were Merton's frequent illnesses, the gathering together of food for him, only to see him grow thinner, sadder and more worn out.

Gina would often call at Deer's Farm for some small thing needed for Merton. Gradually she became less uneasy. Sometimes she talked quite simply. One day she remarked that never before knowing Merton and me had she met people who were not living entirely for material or sexual advantages, and she told me some of her stories, of debauchery and stealing. I think these were true, yet they never came to life—reality was somewhere else, floating, lost. And when I said ' . . . and, Gina,

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suppose you had been caught?" she replied, 'I'd rather like to be "inside".'

I wondered if ten years ago, when she was really young, she might have resembled Rosie, a village girl we had employed to clean Deer's Farm when we were staying there. Having borrowed my daughter's and my clothes to visit cinemas or lie beneath the hedgerows with her young men, before our return she would replace these things, soiled and crushed, in cupboard or drawer; and take the food she fancied to replenish her happy care-free home. Looking at her charming sensual face, her merry turned-up mouth, her graceful ways, and thinking of her flair in my new light coat, I was perplexed. And when I told her not to borrow, she burst into childish regrets and tears, only to continue to take and give to others, those things she felt that we all could well afford. The war solved this problem for us; we left Deer's Farm, and she was removed into the A.T.S., and to have a child, which her mother, being unable to have more herself, welcomed like one of her own. But Gina's divided and often anxious mask could never have had any likeness to Rosie's simple face.

From Fox's Mill in the dark evenings she would sometimes accompany me home. One clear, cold moonlit night there was ice on the road, but Merton insisted on coming too. Suddenly his bicycle skidded, he nearly fell, but Gina quickly slid from hers, in time to support him. I treasured these signs of her quick sympathy. Merton turned to walk back while we went on, and I saw on his moon-lit face a look

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of involved and acute pain; he had to return while we could continue together. But when later, on another occasion I dissuaded Gina from accompanying me, Merton replied while we were alone, 'Gina wants you to know that she likes bicycling back with you in the dark. This is quite true. She really enjoys it. This is her nature. She has told me that she likes going up the hill with you, because she thinks you're interesting, but she never knows how much she bores you, and whether you really want her to go or not.'

These remarks made me feel that I was churlish, for I appreciated Gina's kindness or that part of her nature that was kind. Because of Merton I hoped we could be friendly together, unbothered by each other.

But walking up the hill, as Gina dragged her feet behind her strong body, and flung back her hair which fell again like heavy seaweed to half cover her face, I would talk to her sometimes without being conscious of what became of my words; they would have been as meaningful it seemed if I had said 'um-um-um' or some such noise. It is usual in day to day life for our words to be received in a reflected light which is often very different from the light in which they were given, but with Gina, I could not be sure if my words retained any resemblance to my meaning at all, or were completely cut off from it to form some other idea that might astonish me. And this effort to speak with some common human clarity, added a great strain to the conversation. There was one subject she felt in

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great need to stress, and in spite of my will to endure I often became intensely bored with this insistent and ignorant talk about sex. Sex may be ubiquitous and a fascinating subject, but Gina repudiated the desire for unity, or for giving and receiving pleasure; her grim, limited ideas and reflexions were voiced in the furtive yet didactic manner that I always find intolerable. I tried to interpret them in the light of her neurosis, but not being enough in sympathy with her personality, I sometimes told her hotly of her stupid mistakes when I had hoped to understand or to ignore them.

In a lighter vein I was amused by her vanity. I remember how earlier in the year, an elderly neighbour had glanced at her legs; he was 'lusting' for her, when in fact he was coldly observing that she wore rubber boots in the height of summer; he had not found these at all as aphrodisiacal as she had imagined!

Though Gina persistently voiced her admiration of the Fascist system of forced labour she was disinclined to do any herself. It appeared that she could not absent herself from work indefinitely, and Merton tried all ways of finding her some. Amy had suggestions, Mrs. Clough had others; friends with farms were approached: Gina lounged about, taking little interest in these efforts for her welfare, while writing innumerable letters to the Ministry to urge her claims that she should have a disablement pension. I think at this time Merton hoped that some pleasant country work could be found for her, neither too far away nor too near.

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But he said he was 'torn in two', he wanted Gina and he wanted to work, and the two wants were in conflict. 'I wondered,' he said, 'if you thought I wanted to get rid of Gina, because I was feeling and thinking about work again. But I am sure you know from what I have told you, and from one sign and another how fond I am of her, but it was the very real problem of getting work done. I don't yet know how this is going to work out. I can't help wondering and pondering and turning everything over in my mind.'

I enquired what Gina's reactions were and he replied,

'She says, "It's a bon life for me" and stays on.'

'If she stays on, can't she go out when you're working?'

'The pub would claim her: I send her up to you to get her out of the way sometimes.'

'So I'm included in the mission work!—what does Ivor say?'

'He's the good Samaritan now, till he thinks Gina's here for ever; he hadn't bargained for two. It's not very pleasant!'

Gina was away again, and a letter of invitation from Merton said he had been ill, and would 'stay put' for a time. When I walked through Fox's Mill kitchen I was greeted by a warm and smiling Ivor, who with surprising friendliness kept me in animated conversation. I walked up the stairs relieved by this change of heart, while Merton called 'Come in, come in' and I found him sitting up in bed, with a

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gesture which indicated that I should sit on it. He said, 'It's been very nice here all alone in bed. I've written a short poem, done some of my long one, even composed a piano piece, and lots of letters—it seems all a dream that I've been living in this room with someone else. I look at Gina's shoes and wonder.'

I too looked at Gina's shoes, and knew she would be returning soon, while Merton went on:

'And Ivor has returned to an earlier personality in some way, and is running about getting meals and then reading *Bleak House* to me, until I can't bear the grotesqueness any more, then he switches to T. S. Eliot!' and he talked of his writing, and of his great embarrassment when his poems were published. There was contentment and hope again; a sense of a future which had been lost in immediate muddles.

One evening Austin returned from Fox's Mill Cottage; he had found Merton ill and in bed, as he often was at this time; he was surprised and concerned about the conditions there, the muddle and lack of space, and the damp of the small room. He suggested to me that he would have more comfort if he and Gina came to Deer's Farm for a time. I was anguished by the thought of his frail tormented body, longing for the vicarious life, the sympathy and care that he believed Gina might give, and at the same time longing with a mulish stubbornness to get something done, something that would establish him beyond his life. But he was sensitive to a

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remarkable degree, and the difficulties that he made with others, and often concealed from them, were caused by a superabundance of feeling rather than from the lack of it: it seemed wiser for us all that he should stay where he was, till a more suitable cottage was found for him. Nor could anyone know for how long Gina would find it a 'bon life'; at any time she might go, and perhaps for ever.

Merton seemed to love Deer's Farm; he had a key and could wander there as he liked.

One cold winter evening, late in the year, Austin and I were returning from a day or two in London, and from the path saw a warm light in the sitting-room. Merton and Gina were there: Merton was lying uncomfortably huddled on the couch, dazed and brilliantly coloured with a high temperature. Soon he was in bed with the hot bottles that Austin brought to him.

I remember the following days or weeks being full of oddments: there was the arranging of meals, and the cooking; invalid, meat and vegetarian; the food to be found, the fires made, the cleaning; and the smoothing of personalities that would not normally combine. I remember Gina chopped the wood and went out on a bicycle to do the shopping; I was cautious of my remarks to her, lest they be distorted, carried to Merton and worry him. Through it all shone the centre of those days—the recovery and happiness of Merton.

Before his breakfast I would first take his temperature, and see how he was. Each day he was

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better, till one morning I was astonished to find him standing in his pyjamas on the veranda in the frost and icy wind; he was throwing down to Gina the mackintosh sheet he had on his bed at night; he was fearing that I should see the difficulties about which he had so often spoken, and that could not be disguised.

I was frightened for him; I was wounded myself.

I cannot remember if I retreated, or covered him warmly; I took him hot breakfast.

There were comforts that were necessary and that Merton asked from me, yet these must be given in blindness to his infirmities; in total forgetfulness of all Merton had said, and with his sharp eyes watching my insecure acting.

I was forced to live between two worlds; I was not allowed to rest in one nor in the other.

I thought this trust and rejection was due to illness, but the long state of dying seems unreal. One is alive or one is dead. In a momentary and terrifying darkness of the spirit one can know in advance the total isolation of death: this is unforgettable, but one's day to day life is lived on a less formidable level. Merton was alive, he would always 'get well', his death was an idea, not an experience.

Certainly he had been very ill, but he would not have a doctor, and after being up for a few days he returned by cab to Fox's Mill. He wrote that it seemed terribly sombre and damp there; that he much preferred being ill at Deer's Farm, but now that he was about again there were the preparations for Christmas. I will include a thank-you letter I

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received from Ivor, for a little box I had polished and lined.

FOX'S MILL COTTAGE,
Christmas Day

Dear, dear Mrs. Evelyn,

Thank you again and again. I knew it would be something exquisite! But what a lovely present, you have evidently lined it yourself and I shall treasure and prize and use it with the greatest joy all my life.

Little Merton very quickly noticed the antique hinges, which I think adorable and enhances it in one's estimation enormously. The coloured lining is so perfect, I shall want to open it and show everyone the inner beauty secret.

M's room has been a bower of fruits and flowers, your fruits and Amy Wellington-Jones gave him a flowering hyacinth in a pot.

M. got up for Christmas lunch-dinner you will be thankful to know. We all commenced it in the afternoon (Gina came back last night not much the worse for wear). During the courses A (Amy) walked in on her way back from having her lunch-dinner at Mrs. Small's, and stayed to coffee. You know Mrs. Small. M. calls her a lump of dough and her mother Mrs. Pickwell, who Colonel Small used to call a few fancy names!

And now in conclusion, as the nineteenth-century letter writers used to say,

Yours ever faithfully and most sincerely,

IVOR VINCY.

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P.S. Thank you once more for all the lovely presents and beautiful ideas and designs.

P.P.S. I can never thank you for all you do. The extra butter is wonderful to have, and the eggs are exactly right for M. during the last few days.

I was very pleased to have this exuberant letter from Ivor, but I wondered why he had written it on flimsy brown toilet paper!

I remembered earlier in the year I had brought some large apples to Merton and had put them on a Regency table outside his room. Suddenly there were such clatterings and bangings and mutterings, as Ivor threw them all down the stairs, that made me say,

‘What *has* upset Ivor now?’

‘O I came in today, he was in the armchair reading my note-book; he’s jealous, there’s something in it he doesn’t like.’ Was he a reversed barometer of Merton’s feelings for me; at least of those expressed in the note-books?

The snow sailed down; we were bound to our house till we had swept great drifts away. I found it had hardened in the broad tracks left by the farm carts, and I could bicycle along the lanes. I was amused keeping to the deep ruts, sometimes falling into the soft snow. Dressed in a man’s black jersey up to my ears, a dilapidated sheepskin coat, and trousers, I was warm and excited with the crisp snow, the lovely unblemished whiteness of the

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curving fields, the white feathery trees: only the main road was used, tired looking and forsaken.

Merton was sitting up in bed wearing several thick sweaters, and covered with his dark red eider-down, where he made a place for me to sit. He told me how he had been hurrying Ivor to catch the bus for the town, and that Ivor seemed to hold it against him that buses stop for no one. Did I think anyone had ever been known to have so little sense of time? 'Gina is still in London, where she has lifted a coffee-pot which we badly need. And the landladies are at a wedding there, so the whole of Fox's Mill is mine. This is a lovely feeling, and the snow makes it even more isolated. I hope Ivor takes hours and hours to do the household shopping, for once he can be as snail-like as he pleases, and I shan't murmur.' Looking radiant, and quickly at me, he said, 'You look good.'

'Good?'

'Fine, clear—yes, good.'

But I had become less willing to accept his pleasant remarks, and wanted to dispose of it. I noticed on the table at his side the *Palinurus* that I had lent him, and asked if he had read it.

'I ate up every word, and wish I had another.'

He had sent off poems and articles, and he showed me some of these. He was dissatisfied with them, but his new theory was that work should not 'hang about', but must be 'shunted off'. Did I think, he asked, that protests to his publisher would make his book appear any sooner? 'Time is going. Time is

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going; I feel this *madly* sometimes. I lie here; it seeps by: I can't stop it.'

There was a sound of footsteps in the lane outside, and he said, 'It must be the mad Ivor'; he screamed towards the windows reddening and lining his face, but with perfect good temper,

'Fo-o-o-ol, you've missed the bus, you'll have to go by bike now; you'll fall off in the slush, and come back looking disgusting!' There were little mews of complaint, as Ivor went in to fetch the bicycle.

'There's a letter from the Ministry of Pensions for Gina; can they be giving her a pension? I'm dying to open it, do you think I'd better wait?' I often wondered why Gina should expect a pension, while Merton continued, 'I've had hardly any letters, there seems to be a dearth, but Ted brought these cigs, and Mildred Clough the cake, and Clifford sent bits and bobs of garlic paste, peculiar galantine (which I gave to Amy), black bread, Jewish buns, dried toadstools, so you see we're going very Soho at Fox's Mill, but everything's growing a mould in the dampness.'

He was dreading a talk with 'The Fox's Mill Lady'. She had sent a message that she would like to speak to him; he was sure that she wanted him to go, that she would not have Gina there, but he wished she had written a little note voicing her complaint, and that he and Gina could find a perfect cottage in a perfect position.

'Gina's upset because she thinks she has upset you, and she hopes that by now you're taking no more notice of her rather wild remarks.'

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I told him I had thought no more about it.

'It's so very difficult for her to answer sometimes, and that's when she says startling untrue things; she afterwards regrets them. But you know all about this so needn't worry. I'm only telling you because she asked me to,' and I remembered the occasion of a day or two before: Gina had come to Deer's Farm for a thermometer and other things for Merton. Austin was in London and she and I had tea together. I was tired and hoping she would go, but pleased that we were talking more easily together. I congratulated her on winning a few pounds, I think it was on 'the dogs' or it may have been for selling some object for a profit.

'But what's the good of a few nicker?'

'Rather nice to have them!'

'We all want money, don't we?' she continued in a small voice, 'it stands to reason that everything is more easy if you have a lot, say what you and Merton like; it's what everybody wants most.'

I was weary of the question of money, so I walked out to the kitchen with the tea tray, and began to wash the cups. She stood beside me, talking in an accused voice of Merton's simplicity about financial matters; his unworldly ways; his obsession about work; his lack of feeling for people. Seeing a grain of truth floating on the *surface*, I said, 'But Gina, he has *deep* feelings'; she made no reply. I stupidly insisted, hoping for something more real, 'Don't you think he has deep affections?' She made a scoffing noise, contorted her body around to say, 'He only loves *me*, no one else.' Surprised by this

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blank crudity, my face twisted and I turned away, but not before Gina had noticed: she said in a surprisingly gentle voice, 'O Sydney, please, I didn't mean anything——' walked out of the door and was gone.

THERE had been the usual exchange of visits, telephone calls, and notes, when I had a letter from Merton saying that he was sorry that I and Gina did not agree very well, and he supposed it best that we should not spend too much time together. My life was full, and with much concern; the war seemed endless, and I felt the individuals that fate had forced together might at least be fair and calm together. But so frequent were Gina's visits to Deer's Farm for Merton, and so often was she present when Merton asked me to visit him, that to ignore her would have disturbed Merton as much as it would have seemed unnatural manners to me. I could not remember further upsets with Gina, but I wondered what accounts she had given to Merton of our not agreeing. She seemed to leave little impression on me. I was tired out too, but I remembered her frequent kindness, and those parts of her personality that I could appreciate. I liked to like her, and to leave Merton untroubled. I knew now that her wild remarks must be left unnoticed, and never answered with a question. Questions frenzied her.

And Merton was ill, depressed, his rooms upset for three people. There was little quiet for him to work in peace, and he was anxious about the reception of his long poem. If he was not too ill and in bed

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when I was there, he would walk or ride a short way back with me, glad to be free of his crowded room for a while. Then he would linger, sometimes sheltering by the roadside, where, knowing the solitude, we could talk with the easy reality of friends; feeling too the security that he would be better in the spring, and would have the freedom of the countryside again.

We sat on two heaps of stones that road-menders had left. Behind us was a cottage but no chink or spot of light came from it. A low-lying mist crept towards us.

I said: 'Of course, Merton, Gina and I find it difficult, we're strangers to each other; but you must remember that I'm as little understood by her as she is by me. I'm never used to the meekness of her voice, and the violence of her thought; one's disarmed and then struck.'

'She's frightened.'

'Yes, I know, I take that into account, but I too have become frightened—not of Gina, but of the injury she may do me with you. You take what she says too seriously; you said a few weeks ago that her words were quite meaningless.'

His face was confused, divided, and I continued, 'Don't you think you're muddling her?'

'Muddling her?'

'She hears your shocking prim mockery, which is often so light-deep amusing, but do you think she understands? To her it's just bawdy malice, which she's trying to copy, thinking it's "the thing", and attempting to do it to interest you.'

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‘But she’s perceiving about people,’ and he gave me embarrassing examples of Gina’s acumen and wit, ‘and she’s much happier now, you’ve said so, and I know it.’

‘O yes, with your devotion you’re pulling her out of the gutter, that’s very good, but it seems to me if you’re not more careful, she’ll be corrupted far more seriously, she may be better as she was; the vagabond and thief.’

‘She’s returning to things embedded in herself, in her sensitive nature; it’s what she needs.’

‘Don’t you think you’re forcing her into forms of civilized society which aren’t so very important; a mission work that may not succeed?’

‘She’s frightened of you. That’s why she’s so unnatural.’

‘Why?’

‘As you know she’s frightened of her intellectual superiors, specially a woman, but she really likes you.’

‘There’s much that I like in Gina too.’ A dog howled in the darkness, and someone opened a window to investigate the cause—emptiness, sadness, and guilt filled the air. I shivered and said, ‘It’s cold, let’s go.’ There was no more to be said. It all seemed ephemeral, tottering from one level to another. I knew I had talked too much, had depressed Merton, and was deeply depressed myself. Tiredness, concerns, wars, and cold winter blackness rolled in a thickness together. But riding back alone, out of the mist, under the splendid pale night sky, through the velvet fields and hedges, under the

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deep trees, I thought: this is real, we may all fall to pieces, noble and niggling, but the transcendence remains: this is the reality that we all experience, and use in our different ways, then deny or forget it, and remember it again. And I thought how empty it would be without personal life and relationships—but what does it mean, this curving reserved sky, and what are we, troubling and fussing beneath it? ✎

IT was early spring. How hard at work we were at Deer's Farm, ourselves removing a partition wall to make a studio for me, and Austin would then have the music room to himself. All must be ready for the summer, decorated and clean; for the end of the war perhaps, for work, for friends.

Austin and I had arranged to stay in the West Country for a short time, so we offered the house to Merton in our absence. He was pleased and said they would leave Ivor behind to do the spring cleaning, as he could do nothing while they were there. He said he was feeling 'decayed', but would 'cosset' himself to climb up the hill, and it would be lovely to see different sights for a while; at Deer's Farm one could wander into the woods and the lanes, while at his cottage he felt caged. I had a happy letter when they had arrived there, while he was resting after lunch in the sun, and Gina was wallowing in a hot bath and singing very loudly, for they felt the great freedom after the enclosed Fox's Mill life. In one of the following letters he told me they had been to see Mildred Clough. I imagined their visit; the comfortable house, rather dark and 'artistic', the good tea of home-made cakes in the pleasant lavender-hedged garden, and Mrs. Clough with the detachment or vagueness that suggested she was living in past days, and was troubled with

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the claims of the present. She gave Merton cherries and quince jam to take back, and I remembered seeing her with other small gifts, which she gave in a tentative conscious way, as if she felt Merton to be a young boy, who might be ready to eat up everything he could. But she would smile shyly when he warmly thanked her, and putting an arm round his shoulders would kiss him goodbye: these meetings reminded me of schooldays. Now Merton wrote that she offered him a cottage owned by her in the village street, near to her house, and it would soon be vacant. But when he and Gina looked in the windows it was dark and dreary looking with the present tenants' bits and pieces in it, but he wondered if something could be done with it if he *had* to go there. Milly, he called her, seemed to think that everyone was after it, and had named several friends who already had nice houses of their own; and did I think that this was all invented? he asked. Going to Deer's Farm this time had made him see how really awful it was to live in an unsuitable atmosphere like the Fox's Mill Ladies' one. He only now realized how trammelled and dragged down he felt by their invisible presence. Somehow he had been haunted by them, so that he never dared to look out of a window or walk by the stream without peering in all directions first! It was lovely, too, he wrote to me, to have a little space after the one room existence. He *must* find something else so that he could say goodbye to 'the Ladies'. The Fox's Mill Ladies, living their own busy life in their house near his cottage, appeared to be disinterested but

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kind, and fully occupied with their own affairs, but Merton was sure that they listened beneath his window; when I was incredulous, he said he heard 'the tip-tap of their heels' as they crept away, but I knew that this was imagined.

He told me how his poem was coming out in a continental edition, and the business was becoming far too much for him, and he asked if I thought he should go to the agent that Olivia had advised, which would take a great deal from his profits: would I write *at once* and tell him what I thought about it. This worried letter made me fear the approach of acute illness again, and indeed the next letter was from Gina, to tell me that Merton was in bed with sickness and high temperature. He would be lying there in pain, puzzled, enduring. Gina's letter continued that I wasn't to worry for although he had been pretty bad he was already better, and Merton would write to me the next day, and if he couldn't, Gina would. She added that Merton had taken a great fancy to Deer's Farm, and was wondering if we ever thought of moving how much it would cost to buy, and if it would be more than £2,500. It seemed, the letter continued, that Merton had made up his mind to leave Fox's Mill, and they were having, except for that day and that day only she hoped, a really good time enjoying the change, the house and the garden. Merton was spending the mornings working in my newly made studio, and Gina was cooking. Professor Raymond had called with his horse and dog, they had given him coffee, and he had come again bringing a book that he was

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lending to Merton, and she hoped I was feeling better for my holiday.

This letter from Gina mentioned for the first time Merton's idea of buying Deer's Farm, and most naïvely for about half its value! How Merton would deplore this communication! In his pleasure to be there he had been weaving a story that he owned the place, developing this with Gina. But I had an uneasy feeling that he had set his heart on it, was determined to have it, and I wished he could find another home that he liked so well. I was deeply concerned that he should be uncomfortably housed. There were others' wishes to consider, and I loved Deer's Farm myself. I would make no reply to Gina's suggestion, take it lightly as a passing whim, and I suggested that they should stay a little longer. I heard from Merton that Ivor had come with a fresh supply of food, which they had badly needed, and to stay; 'to minister to him in bed and to beautify the house.' As children feel that older people make their background and security, so they remained for Merton: Ivor was necessary and important.

We were pleased to return again; when we arrived Merton was still there, tidying, pushing flowers into jars, moving quickly here and there with the awkward grace which gave a poignancy to every movement. We all chattered. 'Don't be surprised,' said Merton, 'if I'm standing on my head. Ivor came to clear up, but he went off in a fury, downing tools, because I threw his sandals away. They were mended with cardboard and safety

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pins. To cap all, the Vicar called in the middle of the atmosphere. I was in the meadow, pondering, Ivor was smouldering in his room, Gina was in the bath, so he had to stick his card in the keyhole of the back door.'

Laughing at all this absurdity Austin wandered through to the music room, while Merton continued, 'Ivor took all the money so we couldn't get any food, but we found tins in your cupboard, and blackcurrants and tomatoes. Stoneley Raymond came on his horse, he was very nice and complimentary. He sent you greetings—and to Austin,' he added in the aloof respectful way he always spoke of him. I have sometimes heard others of more 'normal' temperament, and those too, who, one would suppose, display the same outward signs that Merton showed, make some criticisms or blame of Austin (as he without doubt has heard voiced about me), but from Merton no word or criticism ever passed his lips to me. Occasionally he would say an appreciative remark, as if Austin were a tree or a plate or other object. When Austin was invited to Fox's Mill, in return for the visits to our house, with his feeling and learning in music and the arts, he would give an opinion, rather tentatively, then Merton, shifting a little, and using all the politeness that one could ask, would sidetrack or dispose of the remark as if it were a not quite pleasant dream. And Austin, feeling respect for Merton's gifts and sympathy for his situation, was confused by the hospitable but floating reception, and would leave earlier than he had intended.

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Merton continued, 'Stoneley seemed to like Gina rather, and told her to ride his horse sometimes,' and I thought of all Stoneley's generousities. I had said to Austin, that he seemed at times to be placating some angry god, and Austin had replied that Stoneley had 'a weighty nonconformist background . . . psychology . . . the confessional was better than the analyst', and I had wanted to talk more about these things and Stoneley, but Austin was abstracted again with the music he was writing.

'Stoneley caught me getting up,' Merton said. 'I think he sees more than he appears to, in his guarded, careful way.'

'He seems frightened of punishment or of argument.'

'I don't suppose *he* escapes, but he does seem awfully competent. He says the publisher tells me so little about the American and other publications because I was silly and gave them American rights, instead of keeping them. It's now their business and I only get an occasional cheque—what it is to be a business man!'

'He's the successful business man who needs money, but doesn't believe in it. Doesn't he seem prophetic and awestruck in front of poetry or pictures? Does he speak of occult things to you?'

'Not to me!—he's written a long letter about my poem, I haven't dared to read it yet. Will it be *far* too much do you think?' and he found it amongst some papers and handed it to me.

We walked out to the dim cave-like garage, and while I read the letter he continued to talk, with a

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rush of words, as if he were deferring what he really had to say. I glanced at him, he reddened, his lids dropped over his eyes as he said, averting his head,

‘Gina tells me that she wrote to you and put at the end that I’d taken a *great* fancy to Deer’s Farm.’

‘You know I love it that you like it here.’

‘—and wanted to know whether you ever thought of selling it! I’m afraid you’ll think us just like all the others, who try to pounce on it the moment you leave the neighbourhood! Of course it wasn’t meant in that way.’

‘What *did* she mean?’

‘She simply meant that if, in the dim future, you wanted to move to London again, and found something you really liked there, and so wanted to sell this, would you let us know first.’

‘But of course we would, Merton, but we’ve had far too many war-time moves; we’ve been pushed about so much we’d like to stay here for ever!’

‘My new scheme is to buy something, even though the prices are so high now; for all of us, so that we’re not always in each other’s laps, and spied on by the Ladies. Gina says I “create”, do *you* think I’m neurotic about them too?’

‘I think you need a pleasant room to yourself to work in.’

‘How can I find it?’ he cried. ‘I know what I’m for, but how can I be what I’m meant to be, without a corner to work in?’

‘—a quiet place of your own: we’ll find it!’

‘All energies for work, no waste. I long with all my heart and will to be well again; wanting it so

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much, don't you think it will happen? But I seem to get worse and worse——'

He sat on the edge of a rough table, the light from the door fringed his hair with gold. I spoke of the hard winter, and with hope of the summer.

'No sooner am I up, than I'm in bed again, it's always waiting for me, clutching at me.'

I prayed for his pains to go; I spoke of his patience, his endurance. He said, 'The only thing left is the will,' and I cried, 'I don't know what to do!' He looked up at me, arrested: his eyes large and open with perfect trust. He seemed unbearably childlike and vulnerable, moving towards compassion his face was lighted and beautiful; his toughness gone, he stretched out his hand and gently touched my arm.

THE war was over. This thing called Peace for which we all had longed came dumbly, almost furtively. Gradually more friends came to the country; we enjoyed a fuller social life. Except at intervals when Gina was away, Merton and I were not alone together; we replaced our feelings with observations and facts, and often our conversation had a charm of lightness and of laughter.

One summer afternoon, I was drawing the swans and the rushes by the lake, when Merton arrived with thick crimson socks turned over rough green trousers, his shirt open with a figured silk handkerchief tied at the back like a bib; wheeling his bicycle he came across the rough uneven grass, animated, expectant, walking unsteadily, but with lightness and grace. His face was hollowed and lined by illness, but brown and warmed by the sun. With easy careless movements he leant his bicycle against a tree, and falling from the large basket was a small yellow rubber cushion, which belonged to Amy. Dangling it lightly with his left hand, he casually blew it up, deliciously fooling. He turned these small comforts into temporary fun, never quite accepting them. Victor Tresco was writing a piece about him, and was expected to tea the following day. A well-known writer, yet neither of us knew of anything he had written, so I had collected

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some information from a neighbour's *Who's Who*, and Merton remarked that he was sure he was quite the wrong person to write even the smallest 'snippet' about him, but it would be interesting to see what his impressions would be, just because of this unsuitability.

He showed me several fan letters he had had from America; one was written by a drunkard with improper words in it, the others were more genteel. It was difficult for him to answer the writers of these letters who misunderstood his intention; they liked his work for reasons which made him despise it, and we tried to compose a reply.

From my painting bag I took two engraved spoons which had belonged to my family. Tied together with blue ribbon they prettily tinkled as I dropped them into his hand. He examined them and, delighted, he said, 'We must eat from them together.' It was a charming afternoon but too light and intangible for me to convey.

There was a constant exchange of presents. I value in my house now, old china, books, furniture which Merton gave to me.

It was arranged that Gina should come to Deer's Farm each day to fetch the extra milk that we could get for Merton, and anything else that was to spare. Gina would usually bring a note or message from him, and if I was in she would stay for a while.

But returning from London alone after several days I noticed that the milk was piling up, and I wanted Merton to have it. I was tired but as I loved

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the lanes and the air, I thought I should enjoy the ride and to see him for a moment. There was just time to go there and back before it was quite dark. Sometimes Austin was concerned: it was unsafe he thought to ride in the lonely lanes at night, with only the small light which often flickered out as I jolted over the holes and roughness of the road. But I knew the way so well, I knew it in the dark, and had become almost used to the mysterious sounds in the hedges or the trees—rustlings, breathings or scuttlings away. They enriched the return to Deer's Farm, to the light and the warmth if Austin was there. But when the house was empty I both feared and liked opening the door, facing the quiet and the thick dark before I could put on the light. Sometimes an exquisite peace would come, when I would try to feel the loneliness as much as I could, to be wrapped in it, utterly quiet.

Thinking Merton would be pleased to see me, I was happy as I floated with the wind along the top road, and down the steep hill through the Park, the trees bowing and communing, the three or four milk bottles rattling and jumping as I speeded over the rough hill, down to the black main road; there the wind was against me, sweeping and scattering dust and smell of oily lorries, taking the time and the light. I turned down the lane to the village, and was dazed and worn out when I arrived at the cottage. I saw surprise but no welcome. I lingered a moment and was gone.

I was unprepared for the letter I received; a blaming one from Merton. He asked me what cause

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there was for resentment, or was he misinterpreting my mood? I should not have dashed over with the milk, they both admitted that it was irritating if it was not collected; it was lovely to have it, he wrote, but if it was any bother, nuisance, irritation, bore, I was just to stop it, and they could manage now with care, for there was more in the summer. He was afraid nothing would persuade Gina to fetch any more, as she could not bear atmospheres. He added that he too hated them now, they either made him feel dead or miles away, or else caged up in a mad-house, where disembodied wills raven about trying to devour other wills, and nothing could be more demonish than that.

But Merton was mistaken: I was too old to feel surprise or resentment when almost anyone, and Gina in particular, should not fulfil an easy arrangement they had made. They felt guilty about the milk: today the restrictions of simple food have become remote, at that time they were always present. Merton had benefited, we hoped, from the extra food, now Gina proposed withholding it, but it was summer, and I thought it would not be long before it was fetched again. The letter displeased me; I hate misunderstandings, and I thought Merton and Gina were tiresomely smug!

But soon I had several letters about little events, and more about houses or cottages that might be available. There was one in our village belonging to a friend of ours, and Merton was full of hope that he could buy it.

When I next saw him he was ill, depressed, and

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alone: he had heard that the cottage near Deer's Farm was not for sale: Mrs. Clough had been expected but had not come: he had seen some charming bowls and saucers, but when he went to buy them for me they had been sold: two young 'fans' had been to see him and he was quite exhausted. 'They arrived yesterday—late. Christopher was quite *awful*, pretentious and painful, one longed for him to melt away into nice clean air, but of course he didn't, he just went on boring us with naughtiness and grandeur and commonplace, until I felt the waves of my antipathy *must* be banging against him and washing him round.'

'And did they stay long?'

'Yes, for in spite of this really acute feeling, everything went rather hilariously well, because the other one, Jim, is simple and acceptable and he somehow made a bridge. There were lots of shriekings and laughter and they didn't go till after six, when Gina and I lay about in exhausted heaps discussing Christopher's particular brand of enormity. We somehow feel there won't be any more letters after this visit!'

Wondering about Mrs. Clough's cottage, I asked if he had heard from her.

'Yes, I had the letter arranging to come over to-day, and saying that it's a pity I didn't live nearer, then I could use her Hillman sometimes. She says her cottage will be requisitioned if she doesn't let it—so we've put two and two together and think that she wants me to go there.'

'I'm sure she does, but she doesn't want to persuade.'

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'I don't know what to do at all, I really dislike the cottage, even if it were done up, yet feel in a sort of way that it's an opportunity; of course it won't be free for long.'

And he began speaking freely of Gina's restlessness, of her dislike of being 'cooped up', and of his own desperation to find somewhere to live that would be suitable for Ivor, Gina and himself.

While he was trying to establish Gina in every possible way to protect her from drink and the gutter, he would talk of her family, making much of any little distinction, and hoping to discover their names, he searched in the register or on the tombstones of the local churches. He gave her good clothes, and talked of fine manners and fine things. He was changing her voice, attempting to alter her approach, accentuating the importance of style. And he taught her simple cooking, and to notice Ivor's preparation of meals, and the way to serve them on trays, for now they were rarely laid on a table. Stored in Amy Wellington-Jones's garage was a small car, which she sold to Merton, who, pouring confidence into Gina, began to teach her to drive it. One day I remember Gina drove me home; speeding and stopping, running over a bank, reversing into a ditch, with a terrific swing and a sudden grinding stop we arrived quite safely, when she said gently with a clear I-like-you look, 'No one else would have come with me, Sydney!' I was glad I had.

But Merton was worried about the future, his deteriorating health forced him to be dependent on Gina—as well as on others. So Austin and I made

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journeys to view houses and cottages for him, and he himself would see those nearby. He drove to Deer's Farm to tell me of one that had excited him. He described the fine house, and how there was a surprise waiting for them, for at the other end of the tall narrow hall was a most wonderful staircase, perhaps mid-seventeenth century or earlier, huge carved newel posts, and a balustrade 'as solid as a lot of fat babies in a row'. He had stood still, and admired it. He described it more, till I said,

'Merton, can't you have it?'

'—but it would, of course, be hopeless for us. What a house it would be though, if one had money and workmen.'

And the houses we saw were not suitable, nor did Merton seem interested; he wanted to live at Deer's Farm. His will was set. Casually he made obliquely persuasive remarks, intending them to fall unnoticed into the general stream of my mind, and to alter or decide its course. I was divided whether to allow him to think me insensitive and unaware or to embarrass him painfully by revealing that I perceived more than he intended that I should. Again and again I thought of saying with amusement, 'Merton, you're wicked, you're obliquely trying to direct me into selling Deer's Farm to you, when Austin is retiring next year and without a pension, and you know we have so little. We don't want to leave it, and if we did we should have to sell it for its value.' But I said nothing for an iron shyness barred my conversation. I could not show that I knew he was making difficult demands, and I

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was confused that I should withhold something that I had power, but no right, to give to him whose needs I felt were very great. In the past I should have found it easy to voice what was in my mind, but then a necessity of this nature would not have arisen. He, like most of us, intensely disliked being found out. He would speak of his youthful stupidities, but seldom would he acknowledge his maturer mistakes. It distressed me sometimes to see him overlooking others' sensibility while valuing his own; to see wounds inflicted by him ignored, while he nursed his own pin-pricks; but criticizing him I would scold myself, imagining his young life forever in and out of the awful desolation of physical pain. I saw his extraordinary fight against fate; he accepted the challenge and with never ending courage, he made a life of vivid and perpetual interest. He was never idle, all time must be experienced and used, savoured and created into fame, now and for posterity. He would appear veiled and quietly drinking it in, or exhilarated as if intoxicated for a while, or in moments of faith it was as if he left his body and became all life and beyond it. ✎

AUSTIN and I talked and talked, we questioned each other, we considered from every angle, and we thought we should like to live in London again if we had a small camping place left us in the country that we loved so much. Our son was searching for rooms; if we were in London again we could provide these. We would wall up the music room, put in a water tap and a sink, have the garden hut and build a small shed and E.C. We could keep a small patch of lawn in front of it and make a private side entrance; all would be quite separate from the main house, the garden and the meadow which we could let to Merton. Our hearts held the thought: this apparently reasonable but hazardous arrangement may save or extend a life.

And then our search began. All over bombed London we were looking, with agents, builders, specifications, fatigues and disappointments, while Merton enquired of his London friends, 'fans' and acquaintances. Sometimes returning disappointed, I was loath to tell him of our lack of success.

Walking up the hill through the cavernous trees, Gina suddenly said, 'Sydney, don't move if you don't want to—*you know what Merton is!*' I looked at her; was she kindly considering our welfare and inclinations, or having fears for her own? At this time she was a romantic extra for Merton, passion-

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ately needed and accepted; sometimes in the way, but free to come and go. Soon at Deer's Farm added to her personal relationship with Merton would be house, garden, car. She would be an integral part of the structure; she and Ivor attending to Merton's needs. Her face was clear and kind. I took its value and assured her we were hoping to find a house soon and were excited by the moves; theirs and ours.

'My cousin has just written, he's under the delusion that London houses are not selling for nearly as much as ones in the country, he's quite willing to let The Manor House go for something quite reasonable,' called Merton, his curious shrill voice ringing out from the car. He had often spoken of the house where he had spent his holidays when he was a boy. 'It's freehold, and it's all so surprising to me, that I thought you ought just to know, although you've already said that that part of London isn't your fancy.'

I remarked that it had seemed to me dreary and too far out, I was determined to be firm, and he went on,

'It's my fancy in a way, because I know it and love the gardens, and the lovely houses. The Manor House looks into the gardens in front and has its own small one at the back—it's early eighteenth century, with Regency and a few later alterations, some charming fittings, one Adam fireplace, and an earlier heavier one——'

'But miles from the centre——'

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'But I feel you must go and see it if only just to gaze on it. If only I had more petrol I could drive you there. Or are you utterly sick of the whole question of houses?'

So we went to see The Manor House. I had seldom been to the district before. It was an icy November day. The station looked like a pier in a derelict slum coast town. There was sky all round it. We walked by the dark houses, through a sad Georgian crescent torn by bombs, on to a wintry green, and looking up a road, there was Merton's house. Our spirits fell. This dark grey building, pushing out like a fortress into the road, its walls dripping and plaster peeling off, with sodden black sandbags flung at its foundations. The door was open, swinging in the N.E. wind. We peered left into a fine large room, with ceiling papers flapping to a pool of dirty water on the floor; we saw a suburban window pushed into the hole of the bow recess where the delicate curved window should have been. We looked through it to a dank 'garden', on to a huge bomb shelter surrounded by brickbats and cinders. Through the dirty, sticky brown paint and sickly yellow walls, we walked up a wide shallow staircase to a square landing, which I was just beginning to appreciate, when a furious old man with a very long nose rushed from a room and rudely asked us our business. No one could live there, he said, it was too cold and it belonged to the L.C.C. He was an official, whose first-floor offices remained there for three years after we moved in. He proved himself to be a kindly old man soon to die from the strain,

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it was said, of his help and courage in the terrible bombing. We slowly walked down again, and quietly opened another door and found beneath the dirt, a beautiful small room with a seventeenth-century fireplace and window. We sat on the broad window seat, talking quietly, looking at the dentil beams, sensing the house, finding the beauty behind the dilapidations, the distasteful walls heavy with cobwebs and dust. But had we still time, strength and money to deal with such a problem as this? I thought we had and Austin agreed. I wanted to bring it back to the pleasant house it should be, the house that Merton remembered.

‘How exciting, waiting for what will happen next,’ Merton would say. ‘Will all run smoothly now I wonder?’ while we hurried on the business of buying the house. And we talked of the new decorations at Deer’s Farm, mixing different colours and tones; light lemon yellows, dusky pinks, pale sage greens, and pearly warm greys. ‘Anything is nice, isn’t it, if it’s brooded on and chosen with thought?’ He talked of The Manor House, of its beauty, and the changes made to it during the years. ‘It’s delightful I think to have so many bits of different periods in the same house. Sydney, I hope I don’t sound too fancy about it, but I’ve always liked it *very* much, and I still imagine it in its freshness as I first saw it—it’s strange that *you* should now know it too——’ I told him we were longing to be there, how we were doing all we could to hurry the transaction. He spoke of his velvet curtains that were being made, ‘and if anything awful

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happens to The Manor House we shall just have to store them for another day.'

Talking of some reviews of his work that I had brought, he said that he was so excited that he could hardly think of writing. Certainly excitement was in the air. '

There were delays and bothers but at last the deeds could be signed, and I urged Finding, the builder, to do the changes at Deer's Farm.

All seemed clear, when I had a letter from Merton, asking again if I would sell Deer's Farm to him. I was more annoyed with his toughness than sympathetic with his fears, and replied at once explaining that we might return to the house one day, if he should buy another house that he might like elsewhere. I thought I was quiet and very firm! I prided myself.

When I opened the door to him the following afternoon and saw his wasted body, his drawn face, and heard him say, 'I've been in bed with a temperature, headaches, too, I still see double a bit,' I felt it was cruel to be stipulating at all. We moved to the bright fire, and he lay on the couch talking very quickly. 'At Fox's Mill all the windows are covered with frost flowers, and my water's frozen into a lump. Charles has written, but with my usual hold up I haven't opened it yet.'

'You opened mine?'

'Yes—of course you won't think of selling Deer's Farm if you have any idea of returning to it later. I only asked because I thought you might be playing with the idea of giving it up altogether.'

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'I do wish you'd be happy and contented with the plans already made—do you think something horrible will happen? Why should you wish to be our landlord at too great expense, instead of leaving it as we've all so conveniently arranged? Do you think you'll feel about us as you do about the Ladies—powerful inquisitive owners?'

'It would be *very* odd if I did, we're looking forward enormously to coming, and I feel that everything should work perfectly smoothly. It's easy to see difficulties in the simplest arrangement, but there's no reason why they should occur, unless they're allowed to.'

We talked of an easy agreement. 'As you suggested I'll pay what I'm now paying at Fox's Mill and £3 a year more to make a round sum. This is, I suppose, quite a lot less than you might get from someone else today, but it's as much as I ought to spend, and as you've said, you still have the use of a little bit of the house.'

I told him how important that was for us, a place in the country, and asked him what else we should make clear.

'I don't think I've anything else to suggest except that you don't have a wireless, is this very troublesome and fussy?'

'As you know, we're moving piano and wireless to London.'

'I say it quite definitely because noise or the fear of it stopped me from taking Clough's semi-detached cottage. I think I can say that the garden will be kept in good order.'

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I suggested that, the agreement should be for two or three years.

‘Just as you like, and if in that time I find something else I want to buy, I’m sure one of us will be able to find another pleasing tenant, don’t you think? That is if you still want to let. The thought of leaving Fox’s Mill is so exciting. Perhaps soon something will be arranged about my Pa’s affairs, and then if things are easier for me, we could make a readjustment.’

So we made our simple agreement and each signed it. On the surface all was fair and pleasant, but deeper down were shadowy forebodings. Merton had bought Amy’s car for about half its value. She was devoted to him, and wanted him to have it, but I saw clearly the guilt feelings he had about the transaction, which he smothered with voiced bitter feelings towards her. He behaved as if she were making demands on the car, when in fact, she generously loaned her garage and appeared to make no claims at all. I was in an even more delicate position: our relationship was closer, and I had frustrated his will by refusing to sell Deer’s Farm; and he would feel guilty, being Merton, that he should rent it so cheaply. But we believed that a considerable increase in his expenses would worry him still more, and outweigh the advantages of Deer’s Farm which seemed perfect for his needs. The risks were great, but I hoped that when he found that we made no demands, and were accepting and happy in our brief visits, that the tightrope would not break as we walked along it. The agree-

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ment was signed: Austin and I hoped there would be no further talk about it.

While we were trying to settle in a cleaned corner of The Manor House, Merton wrote from Fox's Mill that Ivor was leaving him. He was ill, and the tone of the letter was nervous and excited, but also exultant. He asked if I would be coming for the day?

It was disappointing: Deer's Farm was to provide ample space for three, and now Ivor would not be there. Ivor with his moods, and many years of devotion. He believed in artists, and had absolute faith in Merton's genius. He would never admit that Merton was physically ill, but his inflexible belief in him, and ignoring of pain, may have sustained Merton; sustained him far more than his occasional neglect may have harmed him, when in a fury he left all his comforts. And what gossip and laughter there was and sharing of the fleeting inessential side of life, and what mutual relish of their exuberant quarrels. I remembered how I had arrived at the cottage one summer's day to find a painter friend there, eating lunch. I proposed to share the picnic I had brought, but Merton was anxious that I should also be included in theirs. Being in bed he asked me to see Ivor, and downstairs I said,

'Merton says, is there a little more?'

'None for you . . .' His voice querulously trailed off, as he turned his back to occupy himself in the remotest corner of the kitchen.

Upstairs again, hoping to dispose of the situation

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I said, 'I'm afraid there's no more, and I . . . ' Merton sprang from his bed; in a cotton kimono he clattered downstairs. I thought, he is like an infuriated Victorian aunt! We heard violent shoutings, and he returned with a red and satisfied face and settled into bed again, and in a few minutes Ivor brought up a deliciously cooked dish. He seemed satisfied too.

Merton was an invalid who never accepted the condition. Unless he was utterly prostrated with a very bad attack, he appeared to be casually resting on his bed, with pillows and cushions carelessly behind him; no comfortable supports, bed tables or writing desks, no washings in bed; when sick, no bowls—the bathroom must be reached. When Ivor was not there he washed his own plates and cutlery in the bathroom, very independent; or was he thinking of the dangers of T.B.? I did not know.

I wanted Ivor to stay, for I knew that their hearts were deeply committed. Apart from Merton's temporary emotion, he appreciated his strange and wayward spirit, and continued to need his help and loyalty; indeed, he needed it still more.

I answered his letter with a visit and found him lying in bed, small, straight and slender beneath the coloured bed-clothes. His thin face became animated as he waved me to sit beside him. 'I've been in bed with a temperature, but it's gone today, I'm only resting now. Will you switch the wireless off, it's pounding away at its morning Mozart—now we can talk.'

I wondered if he should rest. 'No, I'm all right

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now. All through this difficult time of moving, Ivor's been kicking up perhaps the biggest fuss I've ever known.'

'What about?'

'All one night there were mutterings, callings out of windows, closet flushings (time and time again), slammings and wild accusations.'

'Why was he so unhappy? Is he feeling unwanted? Has he been to Deer's Farm?'

'We took him up in the morning; he was to help with the cleaning. After about half an hour he fled, and I suppose walked home.'

'But he was very pleasant just now.'

'All is perfectly calm now, and he's better than he's been for years. He's heard from a doctor and his son in Torquay, who want a housekeeper, and Gina and I have encouraged him to go if he possibly can, since it's clear he needs an entire change. I think, don't you, that he'd never behave as peculiarly as he does here, with someone else? The trouble seems to be caused by his reaction to me.'

'But you're used to that—to your reactions to each other.'

'He's worse now. He would get a sense of grievance against *anyone*, but it would take time. What is so amusing is that today he's positively smiling and cushy. He's bringing me things in bed, even answering when I talk to him! It's a pity that such an improvement could only be brought about by the end of his time here,' he said rather primly.

'So you've both decided that he should go? You're

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very used to his moods; you've said that they're often enlivening! At Deer's Farm there'll be room for you all, and how can Gina possibly manage alone?"

'We think she can. But tell me about yourself—you must be absolutely exhausted; when I think of your troubles, our path seems all rosy. The painters have done the bathroom, they've begun on the kitchen, but they have no grey-greens, no lemon-yellows, no grey.'

'Where's Gina?'

'She's gone up to supervise. I tried to do things there but it did me in too much. I think I must do almost nothing myself, if I'm to keep going at all. It's maddening but there it is. Your little furnished part was a godsend when we had our meal and rest there.'

'I asked Finding to mend the gate.'

'He's taken it away to see what can be done about it; he's afraid it's attacked by dry-rot, and he doubts if he'll get a permit for a new one. In that case shall we just not have a gate? I wouldn't mind at all.'

All these little practical things arranged with interest, building up, forming into something, hovering there, unpredictable.

I WAS delayed by illness and a painful operation from going to Deer's Farm, but I frequently heard from Merton who was obviously delighted with his move. Ashamed that I should be unwell I made little of my troubles, for Merton was always suffering, so it was difficult for him to realize the extent of my temporary distress and he was urgent for me to come. Ivor had agreed to stay on for a month to settle them in, and apart from several days when he was entirely in bed, and unable to write, Merton seemed better and stimulated by the change. The weather was unusually mild for the early year, and he could be outside, where it was sheltered and sunny. He told me he was already very fond of 'my' room, and found he was always wanting to retreat to it, though Gina said he must learn to eat downstairs to avoid the laborious tray-carrying.

One night while I was still in hospital, and things were not yet unpacked in the bigger room at The Manor House, a window was forced, a shutter broken. We returned to find the room in a curious disorder, for all the business papers from my desk were like fluttering, whitebeam leaves on the floor. What had the search been for?—nothing had gone. I told Merton of this excitement and he telephoned at once.

'What an awful time you're having! All the

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catastrophes at once. What else *could* happen! It couldn't be good on top of physical ills, it seems quite the refinement of horror! Has it quite put you off the house, and made you feel you're living in a den of thieves?"

'It does seem oddly sinister!'

'I should hate it so much if it happened to me. It's an outrage, even if nothing's missing.'

His voice was thick, and I asked him how he was.

'Yesterday was one of my gruesome days; I've been stuck in bed, but I'm delightfully better, and mean to do all I can to get some sort of feeling of well-being. When are you coming? You *must* come soon, you *must* come and see it all. I wonder what you'll think; we thought you'd be here *this* week.'

I looked forward to seeing Merton, and I knew I should like the arrangement of his things in the house. We went as soon as I could, and we found it enchanting and changed. The sitting-room, which with us had been as light as an orangery, appeared smaller, veiled and like Fox's Mill Cottage, it might have been beneath the sea. The seventeenth-century carved wooden virgin seemed to float near the deep green velvet curtains, which half or quite covered the windows. The grey-green walls, the coral-coloured rugs, the quiet sparkle of lustre, marble and glass, the large Byzantine painting in its worn gold frame were a dim distance in the watery enclosure, and there was a pleasant sub-aqueous smell. This living-room which had been the centre

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of our lives, with bright fires and flowers and food, was seldom used. The small amount of coal we left, no more, served Merton for two winters. Sometimes a wood fire flickered uneasily in the grate; in summer the sun was shut out from this secluded cavern. Life was upstairs in Merton's room, most tightly held.

Being interested in people, and welcoming the support of flattery, he courteously replied to all the letters from 'fans', and often encouraged them to visit him. There was a naval chaplain, a prize fighter, and others, sending their photographs; psychologists seeking material; middle-aged women who write to the famous; young people seeking love; and genuine admirers wishing to know or encourage this writer of unusual and distinguished work. And there were visits from his friends, from his aunt, and from his brothers when they came home to England. Merton would say that ten thousand miles seemed nothing to some people, while he found it an expedition to go into the neighbouring town, but he was always glad and excited to see his brothers, and to hear of his father's affairs, with which they were connected. These visits were woven around his work, and neatly fitted in between times of illness, often when he was barely recovered, or just entering another painful state.

Ivor had gone, and during our first visit Gina too was not there, and Merton spoke of his 'smug' delight that they were both away. Sometimes he would stress his need for being alone, his monkish habits, at the same time urging me, with the

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exigence that was peculiar to him, to spend time with him. He wanted to be alone, he needed one's presence; both at the same time! And two young men, Max and Peter, whom he had known since music-student days, were coming to tea. Austin and I were intending to wander in the country, nor did I wish Merton to feel that his parties were in any way connected with us, or with me. But he came round the house to the music room, and said, 'You're coming, aren't you, Sydney?'

'But I'm just going out.'

'But you will come, of course I'm expecting you,' and hearing his guests he hurriedly went out to meet them.

A few minutes later I was putting my drawing things together when he rushed into the room, 'You *must* come, you *must*. They're *here*; if you're not there, who's going to look after them?' His face was scarlet with dismay and frustration. Compromising, I joined them later. Max, a pleasant blond young man, was quiet. Subdued, we all listened to Peter's dashing stories, laughing sometimes to make a feeling of success.

How easy it may be to write of light words, of impatience and tempers, of demands, blind prejudice and private obsessions, and to leave unconveyed a sort of relentless passion that seemed to dominate him. There was a rich presence within him, that filled and overflowed. It both sustained and burnt him up.

He had been asked to write about Olivia Standing. 'I've been very exercised about my Standing article,

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so I wrote to Olivia in the end. She wired to say she was enchanted and that she was writing. Now her letter's come, and I haven't read it yet! and I've finished the piece and now have to read it through, and make up my mind to post it. It must go or it will be too late. I hope I shan't make an enemy for life!'

I read the letter. 'It's a nice letter. She says she *trusts* you. She wants you to meet her later.' But he would not read the letter himself.

'Did I tell you Mildred Clough is ill? And I've heard too from John. He says my father's first will stands and Alice has the money for her lifetime. Apparently she sold up everything before she left Siam. My father had been spending rather a lot on her before he died, and she is very disappointed that there's not nearly as much left as she expected. However, she may make a will leaving everything to us, that wasn't already tied up. But it's very little at the moment, John coldly says, since everything exists only on paper. I wish I could have had more of my mother's things.'

'I wish you could.'

'Am I talking too much about my money particulars?'

'O no, I like to hear, but wills always seem remote,' and we talked about the Fanny Burney journals which I had lent him, they seemed more real than possible wills in Siam.

'Charles is coming to see me here! He volunteered to doctor me again. I *am* pleased for he knows much more about me than any other doctors.'

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This was good news, and I asked him when he was expected.

‘He might come tomorrow; I hope not before I’ve settled the Standing essay, and sent it off, as I should like to have an undivided mind.’

TIME was going by, and almost unnoticed there was a gradual change in Merton. He could no longer walk or ride a bicycle; sometimes he would drive the car. He lay in the garden or the meadow, or more often upstairs on his bed, where with delicate left-handed movements he adjusted the window behind his head. Beside him was the table piled with books, papers and other odd things. Unless he was too ill, he worked and worked, the book casually balanced on his knee, or composing music on a flopping paper he would seem to be gently stippling it. Or he would sew, or mend and polish a treasure he had found.

But news from Deer's Farm was not good. Both Merton and Gina had been ill at the same time; it had been so 'gruesome' he wrote, that he had asked Ivor to come back. He was settled in Torquay, but readily agreed to return. No longer would grey washing hang on the line, and there would be polish, good cooking, liveliness, glooms and quarrels again. The summer going, he was coming to cope with the winter.

Then the bitter weather began; no one knew how to keep warm, with little coal, gas, or electricity. The Manor House was icebound; the builders in and out with barrows of cement, the front door flapping in the north-east wind.

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In my small diary I read:

M. ill again.

M. a little better. I ask Gina to get Dr. Essex.
There's a lapse in the diary of several weeks.

M. *very* ill. I go to Deer's Farm.

M. better, return home.

It was during this interval when Merton was better that Mildred Clough died. He wrote very quietly, saying what a shock it was; he could think of nothing else, and he and Gina had just been sitting about all day talking about her. He had, he said, a strange disintegrated feeling.

When I went there, a few days later, the country looked wonderful, every branch and twig was covered with thick ice, and then the sun came out. In the evening it all gently glittered under the moon and had a fine stillness, but in the house it was very different. I sat by Merton listening to his story.

'I haven't seen Mildred's friend Constance yet, but Miss White the housekeeper seems very upset by her bossiness. Unless she's heard today I don't think Constance knows the contents of the will, but she's taking it for granted that she should be responsible, and is being very business-like and tidying up in a very unsentimental way, and Miss White says she wishes Mrs. Clough had a more tender friend "to wind up her affairs".'

'But what *is* the matter with Ivor?'

'Things have been in a turmoil, for not only has Gina been fetching and carrying for Mildred's house, but Ivor has been cooking them fish pies and apple

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tarts, and then on top of everything he threw a cup of hot tea at Gina and was thoroughly smacked for his caprice. He's still in a towering rage, swearing he'll "have the law on her", and Gina only turns round to say next time she'll take his trousers down and put him over her knee in true macabre low comedy vein. It's all quite grotesque and peculiar like a Punch and Judy show.'

I seldom saw Merton before lunch-time, but the following day he called soon after the post had been, to ask if I would go up to his room. There was no fire there; it was as if a dull fury was warming and consuming him. I put on his dressing-gown, wrapped myself up in a rug to hear what the morning had brought.

'After all this waiting and agitation, it's all disappointment!'

'O Merton, I'm sorry.'

'Constance wrote this morning with many endearments to say that next to her I was Mildred's closest friend. "Don't let any misunderstandings spoil that friendship. She really valued it." Mildred's will was made when I was twelve! Constance goes on to say, "It never occurred to her that your father would not leave you well off." '

'But she knew when your father died '

'Constance says had she re-done her will later she would, she thinks, have done differently. All the money is left in trust for her daughter Joyce's life, except £500 to Constance, and £200 to a god-daughter. After Joyce's death whatever money there is goes to Constance and the god-daughter;

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two-thirds to Constance, one-third to the god-daughter. Constance says that Mildred had no real contact with this god-daughter and hadn't seen her since she was twelve! I had never even heard of her! Constance stresses that Mildred had only a heavy sense of duty, not a pleasurable one. This is only too true. She seemed determined to be joyless, and her will is mismanaged as her life was. Constance ends up,' he said, fluttering the pages of her letter, '“Bless you darling, don't measure love by a will”, but of course one does in a way.'

'Do you think Constance, feeling as she does, will give you some of her £500?'

'No, but it's just possible that she may leave me her two-thirds if she ever inherits it, and if she survives her sister Gladys, who would of course come first. But I'm so tired of wills that I just tell myself that Joyce in South Africa will outlive us all. I don't think anyone knows yet what Mildred has left—something quite cosy, I should imagine. Ivor tells me after two such misfortunes—first my father then Mildred, I'm not meant to inherit anything more; that I should “reverse it all and turn it to good account, you can quite easily if you want to”. What do you think this means?'

'That you should turn your thoughts from material to spiritual things.'

'Or that I should make a poem out of it? He talks rather a lot like that now; but the spanking is forgotten. They've gone off to do some shopping, and won't be back till after lunch,' and again he talked of the possibility of his inheriting.

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There are people who are intensely interested in wills, whether or not they are hoping to benefit from them. I had never met this interest before I knew Merton. He often spoke of his father's, his step-mother's, Amy Wellington-Jones's, Mrs. Clough's, Gina's aunt's, and his own. It had been hinted that Mrs. Clough would leave him a substantial sum, 'ten-thou' was the figure mentioned. I had simply taken this as a joke, and too, the subject seemed tiresome, even less interesting than the reiteration of a family tree that sometimes an elder member will stress too much.

I thought Merton fantastic, visualizing with a twisted solemnity the remote possibility of a will being made in his favour with the added convenience of several people's deaths. And when later I listened to all the judging and acrimony I must have been shocked, for my sympathy seemed lost. It was only as the weeks went by I gradually came to realize how naked and deprived he felt; how money left to him would have given a sense of security in material life, which he felt with his grave illness to be slipping from him. Mrs. Clough who had known him since his mother's death had not considered his material life, making an addition to the horror and the loneliness. It was a wound that always remained.

But I felt that nothing I could do would help Merton; I was unwanted and had best keep away, and Austin went alone to the country and brought me back news of him. But I had a letter from Gina that Merton was 'very *gravely* ill, and if you are

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staying away purposely, I can tell you for certain your being here would not worry him.'

I received this letter on several layers of consciousness.

I have my own full life and I am proud.

Merton is ver'y ill, I should never be told that he *wanted* to see me. There are often concrete things that Merton asks me to do for him, therefore he needs me. With all Merton's refusals and denials he must know that his health and his spirits are better when I have been there.

What is all personal feeling and self-pride in relationship with life and death? Have I so little insight into inescapable affliction? There is the impenetrable deep, the darkness. It is there.

And vaguely the risk of a refusal is greater than the risk of an acceptance.

I went to Deer's Farm at once. Merton lay very still, like a mummy with only his mouth showing. Sometimes his long hands would delicately finger and pull at the sheet. He was a slender wild image of endurance. His voice was small and muffled. I remembered long ago on a dark night when I was very ill, I had felt life coldly, remorselessly being taken from me; a kindly nurse had held my hand, and warm life returned to me through her. When Merton took my hand I felt my life was also his; I tried to empty my mind, quietly to believe that a beneficent power was giving him life and strength. . . now Gina opened the door, glanced in. When I left she was outside, and I saw a terrible sneer plastered over her face, as she said, 'O, holding hands.'

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The following morning she came round the music room beneath the high window and knocked on our door. She said that Merton was much better and wanted to see me. I went up to his room and he said,

‘Will you do something for me?’

‘Why, is it so difficult?’

‘Will you go to see Mr. Everard, who is the head of Jameson’s, you know my father’s firm, and talk about my affairs? Will you see if I can get any of the money my father left? . . . I’m *sure* there must be some, they’re just putting me off. Jamesons have always been rather difficult. When they cut me off completely after my father died they still held £500 of his, they said it had to be kept for Alice, but I’m sure brother Stephen had it last year.’

‘Are you needing money now, Merton?’

‘No . . . but if I should need more will you see how best I can get it?’

I thought it would be an embarrassing interview and a useless one; and deep inside me I was crushed by the sense of wasted time; another morning thrown away. How would Mr. Everard like an unknown woman enquiring into Merton’s family business? But I was interested too. I have seldom been to a City office, business of ours I can generally arrange by letter or telephone to Bloomsbury. I asked Merton to warn Mr. Everard, and then I would make an appointment.

So I went to the City. In the first small office sat a pretty powdered girl, wearing a girdle of pearls round her soft pillared throat. She showed me into

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a large, thickly Turkey-carpeted room. I was wondering how to be comfortable in one of the huge brown hide chairs, when Mr. Everard came in, tall and immaculately dressed. He at once began talking without any reserve about Merton's affairs. From a folder he began reading a list of investments; I waved these aside, then he praised himself for having 'done so well' for Merton, 'getting on for eight thousand now'. I brought the conversation back to Merton's illness and his needs, his hard work, his concern about money and his father's firm.

'There's nothing there; I expect you read Jameson's report in *The Times*, we're just keeping it going. Stephen, John and Bruce have told him so a dozen times. Merton will never have the faintest clue about business; he's a child, quite *hopeless*, can't understand; there's not a penny coming from tin,' and his sensitive, ravaged face became animated, 'and who's the nit-wit, what's her name Downs, who writes Merton's letters for him, calls herself a secretary?'

We were having a game of enquiries, and I wanted to go. As I moved to the door he said gently,

'Merton's all wrong about his brothers. Stephen's the very kindest fellow, he'd do *anything* for Merton; I happen to know he's just sent him his service gratuity. Merton thinks more of John, but Stephen's the better man—still, John and Bruce are all right.'

As we shook hands, I thought I had done nothing

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for Merton. I felt very sad; I had seen a world that could never understand.

Tired of dirt and dust and incompetent builders at The Manor House, and frustrated from painting, I pondered and fretted. I thought of Merton's resentments, his malicious remarks about people, knowing that when those same people entered his room, he appeared charmed and entertained by their presence, smiling, urging them to stay, with Gina there, insinuating and attentive. I remembered how Gina some time ago had been tolerant in her remarks about humans, but now she voiced suspicions that encouraged and far surpassed Merton's. Sometimes they seemed like two birds of prey, sharpening each other's claws, and I saw Merton snapping at life. *No one was safe.*

But there were happy times too. Merton changed even as Gina went out of the room; he became himself, bitterness left him, superficial arrogance, silly conceits slipped away; he grew gentleness and roots. I could not understand why the one he loved and praised should make him so uneasy. I thought of Gina's frequent threats to leave. But how could Ivor manage alone with his vagueness, and his stubborn denial of pain, now that Merton was so ill?

I wanted to think well of Gina.

She often came to the music room for tea or coffee or a meal. Stealthily she would be there, a soft voice swiftly offering, with a wide gesture, cigarettes of my brand, generously leaving the remains of the red packet when she left. We had little to talk about

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except of Merton, his health and his needs. But I had become more and more wary, for again and again she had misrepresented to Merton what I had said.

I was uncertain whether she intended the mischief she was making.

I thought of Ivor, who was detached in his dark moroseness. Often now he seemed cornered and bullied, yet he tenaciously denied illness and evil. Sometimes he would rise to a gaiety of gossip, like an occasional tinkling of muffled bells.

Austin would say, 'This is a mad house now,' when we heard the cries, shoutings or bangings.

But Merton would be waiting to hear of my visit to Mr. Everard. In perplexity I rode in the drizzling rain along the hard road to buy a coach ticket for the next day. I thought of Merton's claims and rejections of love. I thought of his childhood again; the tiny little boy on his mother's knee with blue ribbons in his curling hair, daintily pleasing the visitors. Was his mother deeply disappointed that after three strong boys, the fourth was not a girl? Did she hate him for his strangeness, did she adore him for his feminine ways? I wondered as I bicycled along should I go or stay away? I thought again of tribulations, of deep pain, of loneliness and death, of young hearts crying out . . . a lorry driver opened his right side door, I swerved, skidded, and thinking it both necessary and reckless I fell in the mud in my white coat and broke my arm.

It was two or three weeks before I saw Merton again. He wrote that he was grateful that I had been

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to see Mr. Everard, but he thought that it was all rather premature; it was just that he had become anxious when he was ill. There was money in the bank, his publisher's statement at the end of the month, which he thought would be good, and other small cheques were due. When I saw him again he was still full of money affairs.

'I don't think it entirely right, do you, that Ivor and Gina should just grab pocket money whenever they want it? For though it works out at a small weekly dollop sometimes, at others they must rather hold off.'

'Why not arrange something then?' I said, thinking of the drawer in his desk which was constantly raided for small sums.

'Do you think thirty shillings a week each would be fair?'

'I don't know, Merton, these things are so personal. But try. I suppose if they needed more, or less, they'd tell you?'

'I think it would be better for you too to have more rent. You could undoubtedly get more—I wonder if you talked to Everard about this?'

'Good Heavens no! Merton, what a *very* peculiar idea! There's nothing whatever to say. We talked about your borrowing, if necessary, from the bank, and more about your brothers. I told you that he thinks they, especially Stephen, would do anything——'

'I know Stephen's present came from his gratuity, though perhaps it was not quite all. It was very nice anyhow. But the point is I don't want any of them

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to have the partial responsibility of my expenses. I still feel, in spite of what Everard says, that something could be arranged in connection with what my father left. He's been all along very afraid of letting me think that he can delve into anything of my father's, but John, pessimistic as he is, has given me rather a different picture!'

'Why not ask him direct?'

'It's quite clear that they'd all come to the rescue if it were ever necessary, so I don't think I need worry really. Stephen's been extraordinarily good. In his last letter he offers to send me "a few hundred pounds" as he puts it, whenever I need it, and he also wants to know what it costs to keep Ivor, Gina and me, so that if I'm ill again for a long time and not very much coming in, I won't feel that I've to delve into my capital.'

I was pleased that my talk with Mr. Everard seemed to be bearing fruit, and that Merton's brother was behaving just as he had said he would.

MERTON was much better again, everything was simpler. When I went upstairs to see him, during our brief visits to the music room, Gina would follow, and listen to our conversation, shuffling a little, holding cigarette smoke in her mouth, and suddenly bursting it from her lips like escaping steam, and adding a few comments. At this time she might criticize censoriously the behaviour of a friend or acquaintance as 'not very well bred', then Merton would avert his face till the remark had drifted away.

Sometimes she sat there, her hand on her hip, her knees brown and polished by the sun, her legs in rubber boots, and I was reminded of my childhood. When hearing in the distance the noisy brass band of Lord George Sanger's Circus, we ran helter-skelter over paths, steps, grass, flower beds, through hedges, over vegetables, down the steep garden to sit on the wall beneath the beech trees, and watch the raucous gaudy procession as they made their way to the common: giants and dwarfs, caravans and cages, the lion and the lamb lying peacefully together, and on a prancing, cruelly curbed horse rode a woman with brown thighs and black boots, and on her aquiline face I saw an expression of appalling disregard and boredom; suddenly the glamour went, it all seemed intolerably insecure and sad.

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But did Merton feel not only the attraction to Gina's physical health and strangeness, but also see in those curves the flamboyance and darkness that he would admire so much in some late seventeenth-century baroque carving? Or was he reminded perhaps of the more restrained beauty of a Verrocchio's David, but with deeper furrows beneath the eyes, the face more bothered and divided.

Later Merton said, 'I don't think Gina should wear those boots all day, do you?' and soon I saw her strong thick feet criss-crossed in childish sandals. Their row of toes so short and round, it seemed they could not possibly contain the usual joints. I thought of the baby game 'This little pig goes to market, this little pig stays at home', and looking at Gina drinking her coffee, almost at ease, I remembered how I felt when I wore some Russian boots I had, how different when I changed these for light slippers, and I smiled at Gina, and she smiled back.

One beautiful spring morning Helga came to the music room. She was staying for the weekend with her father, a retired lawyer who lived in the village. She knew our family well, and many of its affairs. Walking by a side way down to a little copse I looked at her tilted El Greco head, at the hair like red leaves on the pale stem neck as she trailed along with her sensitive nose leading. Glancing back I saw Gina withdraw her face behind a curtain. I was not unused to this gesture for she liked to report on our comings and goings. We sat on a flowery bank in the

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spring sun; everything was warm and silver and singing, and Helga began with her amusing liveliness and wit to talk of her troubles and poverty. I responded lazily about the artist's difficulties. I did not feel them, for I was contented in the sun. Our daughter had been staying with us, and when Helga spoke of her, I awoke to the reality of the artist's frustrations, and she said,

'But you could get £200 for Deer's Farm easily, you probably don't get half that!'

I had for many years been very fond of Helga, of her kind heart, but I knew well her engaging fallibility with her quick amusing tongue, yet I replied,

'I know, do you think it should make me feel guilty?'

I saw how swiftly she registered the remark. I was dismayed. Never had Austin or I spoken of Deer's Farm rent to anyone before. Now I spoke seriously to her, stressing the importance that our conversation should go no further; how much Austin and I appreciated Merton being there; how we should dislike the bother of change or of strangers. She understood these words and their simple intention, but she felt too some unvoiced unhappiness in the arrangement. The uneasiness was not financial.

I picked a bunch of flowers for Merton, and we slowly walked back.

Early that evening we returned to London, and I only learned later that Gina, at the same time, asked Helga to a drink at the local pub. They had rarely met before. It was a swift transaction, and

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enormously increased when it was served to Merton. It was one of Gina's choicest plums.

There would be no peace with Merton now, no easy friendly arrangements, but a background of hostility and suspicions.

And when I asked Helga, 'Why did you speak of Deer's Farm rent to Gina? You assured me you wouldn't. Merton is so ill, and that sort of thing worries him,' she was piteously confused and mumbled 'O she badgered and badgered me. . . .'

Trying to refresh ourselves by brief visits to Deer's Farm, both Austin and I found the climate in the house both heavy and electric. When by chance we met Ivor outside, he would stubbornly ignore our greetings. And we could not isolate ourselves from all the malice, nor could I entirely discount the scatological remarks, which Gina inconsequently and oafishly emitted, saying they had been voiced by Merton. Gina reminded me of a poor old man, when I was a child, who, as we passed the church on our walks to the toy shop, would often be standing in the gutter, waiting to mumble, 'Your drawers are coming down, your drawers are coming down.' Our grown-up sisters told us to 'take no notice; it's sad for him that he has to behave so stupidly'. I took no notice, it was sad for Gina. But the incidents of weeks and months had accumulated, troubling the nerves, gnawing at the heart. I longed to be in the air, and I was foolhardy: I attempted to break through all the foggy nonsense and suspicions: I tried to voice what was in my heart

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without disturbing Merton. He lay by the open window, polishing a small agate box, and I told him of my fears that sharing the house, though we were not often there, seemed to be straining our friendliness, which I valued so much. Sometimes, I said, it seemed like a 'lively hostility'.

“‘Lively hostility’”, it is really nonsense. I’m completely free from such a feeling. It would be *very* extraordinary if I was not. There are awkwardnesses, reservations, difficulties of all sorts which are forever making communications between people imperfect, but these are *slight* misunderstandings, nothing more, and it seems to me that they’ll never disappear entirely. One just mustn’t bother about them or take them personally. I know that Ivor’s rude, but he’s a difficult creature, and nothing any of us can do will change him. It would be *impossible* for me to influence him in any way. Put it down to some quarrel he’s had with me or with Gina.’

‘I know——’

‘He always pours out his rudeness or his sullenness on anyone who happens to be near. It’s a most unattractive habit and it puts nearly everyone against him sooner or later, but nothing can be done about it. I can understand how unpleasant it is for other people, for I’ve known it and disapproved of it for so long.’

‘Ivor may be difficult, but I don’t think he’s a bit mischievous——’

‘He’s just caught and entangled in his own temperament. You should just take my word for it, that no sort of hostility against yourself exists here, or

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could be fostered by me, even if I wanted to do anything so pointless and unpleasant.' There was a pause, 'I want you to discuss the subject of Deer's Farm with me as you would to a stranger.'

'But why? What about? And you're not a stranger.'

'I mean, of course, I want you to state your own case, leaving mine out of consideration.'

'Ah, Helga—and Gina?'

'From what I believe Helga said to Gina you don't like to ask me what you feel you really ought to be getting for Deer's Farm, since you think I would find it too expensive.'

'Merton, it's terribly unfair, all this spying and reporting—mis-reporting. I do wish Gina——'

'Gina's the very *last* person to want to make trouble. I don't think there was any conscious mis-reporting. There should be no question of any sort of sacrifice on your part. If there is, a false situation's at once created. I'm aware that I've paid a very low rent for Deer's Farm as things are today.'

I told him that I was not concealing secret wishes about the rent, that we had both considered and agreed. I was concerned with the sacrifice of friendship, nothing else, and I was doing all I could to avoid that sacrifice. And he continued, 'So far as sharing Deer's Farm goes, I can't see any reason why it shouldn't work perfectly well. Apart from little difficulties with Ivor (which I'm afraid will always be cropping up, although they're quite meaningless), hasn't everything run rather smoothly, or am I very blind? It seems that we've all gone our

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own way, purposely avoiding any suggestion of host or guest, since it's difficult to know which is which.' He waited a moment, his eyelids fell and he vigorously polished the box. 'I've sometimes felt we had too much of the house; you must feel cramped in your little bit, but I've always hoped that you'd come in, without constraint, for baths, telephone; or what-you-will. Perhaps I haven't stressed this as much as I meant it, because I saw your determination to live in your own part.'

These remarks were some of Merton's most fantastic. We did not feel cramped at all, and never resented Merton borrowing our things, and using the music room for his friends; we liked it very much. But one had to know Merton very little, to realize that he would have been outraged had we gone in 'without restraint for baths, telephone, or what-you-will'. His setting and temperament were quite different, and there would have been underground scenes in no time at all, or such voicings would have seeped through the walls, that the roots of our relationship, in which I believed, would have been torn from the ground. This is no moral criticism. I simply took it as an inevitable part of his nature, which was exacerbated by his illness. But I was silenced: it was as if a child from some fear which I had generated was playing a grown-up role which he hoped I would not dispute, and I felt about these acts as he did; they were a necessary part of his excess of sensibility, not to be taken too seriously. And even the affectionate mockery that I might have employed would have been a cruel breaking of the

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mask which we both acknowledged. Even those acts of malice, which he sometimes so skilfully employed, seemed not quite real, as if his strength of feeling, of compassion must be held to earth by some more artificial and mundane passion.

When Gina was out Merton would call from his window, 'Anyone there?' and I would go up and talk with him. One day, he asked if I would come in the evening, and I found him alone, lying on a camp-bed in the garden. His eyes had the dark and desolate look of a child who is bewildered by his punishment; apprehensive, shamed, submissive; the animal humiliation that is terrible to see. He did not speak of Gina.

In the morning Austin said, 'I shouldn't have noticed Gina returning by the back door in the middle of the night, if she hadn't been so stealthy; it woke me and I looked out. In my sleep I must have thought she was a thief!'

In Merton's room, he and Gina were pouring out abuse of Ivor to me; the door trembled for some moments: they waited, apprehensive, then Ivor burst in 'It's all lies, LIES, LIES. Mrs. Evelyn——' with such passion and tears and pain, that I followed him downstairs risking a rebuff. He was standing by the french window, shaking and desolate. I hesitated, unable to find the words that would be comforting. I touched his arm and said,

'Ivor, I'm sorry.'

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'O Mrs. Evelyn, you don't know, you don't know . . . Gina doesn't know *how* to behave.'

'I *do* know, Ivor.' I felt I could say no more and left him.

Soon he crept from the house early in the morning, leaving no address. And when I saw Merton again he was ill and troubled, unable to sit up or write. 'I would have written again, but I've been flattened out for some days, after two aunts and a chauffeuse-for-the-day had been to tea. They were very nice and brought honey and a cake and lots of John's shirts for me, which fit Gina perfectly, so I don't think they were really responsible for my state.'

'I expect you were just working up for it—have you heard from Ivor yet?'

'No word from him yet. I do think he's the most split in half person I know. I'm still thinking of making another will, you remember I spoke of it weeks ago—about leaving Ivor some more, but now I can't think what to do about him. It seems almost as if I had never known him. He seems to infect me with his own inconsequence.'

'Have you seen anyone?' I asked.

'Amy came, in one of her most sergeant-majorly moods; it appears that Gina had told her in a letter not to stay with me long. She was really quite good alone, and made tea and toast with no fuss. She fled early to catch her bus. She's ill, but doesn't say what it is. But the great trouble of the last few days has been that the publisher thought that the poem that deals with Amy was libellous. He doesn't

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think so now if I make some small changes. I hope Amy won't mind my picture based on her. It isn't really her, but obviously founded on bits of her. It will be a nuisance if she's hurt. Don't mention it at all, will you? I'd much rather she found out after the book is out. It probably won't appear for months, and then she might not even come across a copy. It is difficult using living characters. One seems almost bound to give offence. I suppose I must learn to wrap myself more and more in fictional clothing. The posy you picked is still going on; you see I haven't touched it.'

I asked him if Charles Essex had been.

'Yes, he turned up yesterday. He seems very pleased with me. The blood test agreed with the sudden mysterious lowering of my blood-pressure. He thinks I'll be much better now, if I get stronger.'

'What extra food should you have?'

'He's given me another of those dreadful foods to take. I haven't had it yet, but he says it's not nearly so bad as that diabolical beef-tea-bone-manure I had before. It would be nice if I could be up and about again as I used to be.'

'Do you think Ivor will just turn up one day?'

'He might, as if nothing had happened, but I do wish he'd send his address. Parcels have come, butter and other things, different postmarks; do you think he's starving himself?'

'Couldn't Gina be pleasanter to him? He seems so frail and sad.'

'She tries to be, but he's maddening.'

'I know he is, but as he's devoted to you, and

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you really need him here, can't some of the quarrels be avoided? Don't you see that it's *miser*y for him? Don't you see that when *you* shout at Ivor, or push him out of the room, he doesn't really mind, he quite likes it: but when Gina tries to do the same, it's an insult. And aren't you rather neglectful of him yourself?

'Being tucked up in my room as I've been so much lately, cuts one off from life outside. It flows on, and one thinks one's own thoughts; perhaps inevitably this gives an impression of lack of friendliness, when really one's withdrawn into oneself only to preserve what little energy there may be there. I don't know if I give this impression, but if I do, there's the reason.'

As he had not worked on his long poem for more than a year, Merton was feeling the shock and strain of completing it almost intolerable. He occasionally told me about it, for he could not imagine how it would sound to others. I was very much engaged in London, but Merton's letters 'waiting for me to appear' and my concern for him made me fit in short times when I could be there. Gina was very good at this time in sending me news, by letter and telephone, of Merton's health and spirits. He was usually in bed now, while Gina did what she could to cook and clean and look after him. When we went down she seemed pleased to see us, and grateful to have an occasional meal prepared in the music room.

She came very quietly one evening and sat by the glowing fire. She looked tired, depressed and cold. It was too much work without Ivor, and far too lonely in the winter months. I thought for a moment, 'Surely she won't make off, even Gina couldn't do that . . . if only Ivor would send his address.'

In a rare quarter of a north-west wind the electric wires fastened to the corner of the house vibrated, we called it singing and rarely noticed it, but now I heard them—moaning. Shaking myself from this depression, I made some coffee and asked Gina if

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there was anything I could do, and we were talking pleasantly about nothing, when she hesitated and said:

‘Merton hasn’t made another will yet; if he doesn’t do it soon it will look like *undue influence*.’

For a moment I was held by the words ‘undue influence’, wondering how Gina remembered these newspaper phrases. I then felt sympathy for an anxiety that must have been acute, troubling enough for her to ask my help.

‘Sydney, will you speak to Merton about it?’

I very much like people to have what they most want, if it seems harmless to others, and I felt sure that it was necessary for Merton’s happiness and pride that Gina should remain with him. Some months before when Merton had first spoken of his will, he had asked my advice about a substantial sum he was leaving for an annuity to Ivor; he thought it insufficient now that everything had become more expensive, and what did I think? I agreed with him, but said I knew little about annuities and if he liked I would make enquiries. The rest he was leaving to his brothers and Dr. Essex. I do not remember that he ever asked me about this annuity again.

But soon Merton began to talk of his will, as if our words from the music room had floated up to him.

‘If you’re really making another will, I suppose you’ll leave something to Gina?’

Very slowly Merton murmured as his full lips bit the end of his fountain-pen,

‘No . . . she’d drink it all away.’

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I was surprised and said, 'But she's here—and you love her—I don't suppose she'd drink so *very* much.'

We never spoke of the subject again.

But Gina asked if Merton had spoken of his will. I moved away, saying, 'Would you drink money away?'

I turned to hear her say with a kind of pure excitement, 'O no, not *Merton's* money,' and the subject was closed.

Soon, Merton was animated again with the idea of buying a house. I thought a move would not be good for him but the *idea* of buying and furnishing a house was giving him a sense of life and of future. Imaginatively it took him away from his room and his pains to the houses his friends were writing about. Each one suggested, interested him and removed him away from illness and death. He seemed strengthened.

Gina came in, and the conversation was restricted and fastened on to attacks against Amy Wellington-Jones, while I was remembering one morning, not long before, when Merton had managed to drive Gina and me to meet her at the view of a furniture sale. She was ill, lonely and unhappy since she had turned her house, unsatisfactorily, into two. She had asked Merton to drive her home to tea, obviously needing his few minutes' friendliness there to warm and create it into a home. He said he had no petrol. She was walking wearily down the drive, after the sale view, when we overtook her. Merton was pur-

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posely neglecting to drive her the quarter mile to her bus . . . I do not know what I said but he stopped and she came into the car, which had belonged to her, and Merton 'dropped' her too soon. The last I ever saw of Amy was her flagging, dispirited figure, painfully attempting to run or trot to catch the bus; her thick legs enclosed in doll-like warm stockings with socks over them. And we drove on, miles and miles around, had tea in a café and arrived home after dark. I must have exuded disapproval all the time.

I remembered this, as I listened to all their complaints. I was estranged, cut off by a generation of life.

When next I saw Merton alone I said,

'You're a little queen and need your subjects; you like to keep elderly people on a string. Amy and doubtless I are your convenient Aunt Sallies; we bear the full brunt of your brick-bats now that Ivor is away.'

' . . . one always bites the hand that feeds one.'

'O yes, indeed, in adolescence, I know all too well. Some people grow up and you should.'

My lecture was over.

IN *The Times* I read that Amy had died. I was shocked and telephoned Deer's Farm. Gina answered and said at once, 'She's left Merton the chandelier!'

'Oh,' I said coldly, thinking, 'Do they only treasure what people leave and never what they are?' But I was uncertain of my reception of Gina's excited remark, and when I saw Merton he was suspicious, darting his eyes in every direction and blackly reserved, but later he gained confidence and told me of Amy's sudden death. He was tender. He and Gina had sent flowers, and on our music-room floor I picked up a small card, which by mistake had been dropped there, 'For Amy, *with love*, Merton and Gina.' I was glad she had left Merton a very fine present. 'It was good of Amy to remember me,' he said, 'she had written a little note and left it in her bureau.' Yes, he was tender. I wondered if Amy was the witch cult-victim, and the chandelier the miracle-working relic.

I said, 'I don't know how much you mind, Merton.'

'I mind *very* much—but when people die one always feels "That's neatly finished off and tidied up".'

I knew I should hear only good of Amy now.

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With his inflexible demands on himself, Merton would speak of his writing as if he were in some normal lazy health. 'I keep writing short poems and neglecting to finish my long one.' When he rippled with wit or ribaldry, though one knew more deeply that he felt like a hunted animal, the lightness was infectious. His form becoming more angular, he had gained the appearance of an attenuated Gothic stone carving, with rugged lines full of stern or impish character. With his regard for personal elegance he felt to the full the cruel humiliation of the more spectacular attacks of his body, but the almost frivolous disgust which he voiced seemed like a sign of vigour that might overcome the mysterious enemy. When I asked Gina about Dr. Charles Essex's opinion, her replies were always sanguine. Where was Death? Far away or near, it moved like some ghostly thing that is discredited.

Gina had gained an abundance of cunning, and neither disliking deceit nor apparently feeling the shame of detection, she could be remarkably enterprising on this insecure level. But I believed in her kindness, and saw her trying to look after Merton alone. I regretted that she would not allow me to help in small ways, when, for example, I cooked a lunch, and Merton was appreciative. Nevertheless I was very sensitive about interfering at all. A near neighbour occasionally brought to the house a covered bowl of good food for him, and in spite of her 'screech-owl' voice, as Merton said, he seemed grateful, except once when it was a 'sinister green soup, which tasted sad and sweet as if it had died'.

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'The engraved mirror, Sydney, would you like it? One day soon, things will be moved around here, and then you could have it,' he said, looking away embarrassed.

'You've given me so many things, you must keep it for yourself.'

'Or the red and gold chest, would you like that?'

'Yes, I should, very much.' It was not a piece of furniture of which I was very fond, but I was moved by his wish to give, and we discussed where it should go at 'The Manor House. He was contented. Months later I reminded Gina of this gift.

Austin and I valued the quietness of the country we knew so well, away from the noise and the dirt of shattered London. We needed peace, but Merton could not rest. When he spoke again of his wish to own a house, to buy Deer's Farm, I was interested in his eager voice, and asked him what *we* should do if we sold Deer's Farm, and he quickly and cosily replied,

'You could just pay us a small rent for your little bit.'

It had been neatly arranged for us. Suddenly my thoughts became terribly clear. Only a winter or two perhaps—emptiness. And Gina here? We must make no sales, no more agreements; we must drift along and along, never letting Merton know, for I could not say, '*You may*' not be here, Merton, we can risk no arrangement that might tie us to Gina.'

I said: 'But why should you feel so unsettled?'

'Of course I don't about the house yet, because

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there is still the arrangement we have. It would be nice though to own something that I could afford without over-burdening myself; then you could be really business-like about this. I love it here, and the very thought of moving seems quite impossible at the moment, but it isn't of course in the least—but if you ever did decide to sell, Gina suggests my plunging, then she would keep sixty ducks or more to pay the rates and taxes and bank interest; I should try to keep my own money free for other uses. John wrote to me yesterday from Siam, I'm always hoping for interesting news of Alice and the money. Of course nothing's happened; he only says she's rather pathetic; last time it was "crazy and harmless". I still think of her as my wicked step-mother. He says Jameson's is recovering, and Siam settling down; nothing more, always disappointing.'

I changed the subject and asked him how he had been.

'Worse last week, but Gina rang Charles, and got pethedine and medinal (I'd taken four from your drawer but put them back again), and that mysterious headache remover, and I took all I could and felt better, though feverishness increased until a day or two ago.'

'And now?'

'Now I'm serenely floating.'

He mentioned a young Frenchman who had lately come to London, and was an admirer of Merton's work. We all knew him a little. Gina often talked of his title, pooh-poohing its importance, but showing by her interest, and later by assuming that it

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was false, that she held a contrary opinion. 'Henri has written us both a letter, pages long about his new work,' Merton said. 'He says it's like a silly game, which he will enjoy when he gets to play it well. He likes his surroundings, the old country house, big trees, lawns and a pool. He loved being here, it was more enjoyable than anywhere else he'd been in England. He nearly came again the other day, then a sudden fit of depression descended on him! He wants to come this weekend—it's not to see me,' he added.

'But can you bear visitors just now?'

'It'll be all right, if he stays with Gina nearly all the time. We've been hoping for a long time that Ivor would come back soon so that Gina can go for a holiday. I hope he makes the effort to turn up. Parcels of food come regularly, with *all* his butter. I'm longing for him to do a little house cleaning and cooking. I've had to make a new curtain for the glass door, since the Victorian gauze is so old that it rotted. The new net cost nineteen and ninepence halfpenny! Can this be right, Sydney? When I bought it I thought the man meant sevenpence something a yard; not seven shillings.'

'There's nothing at all for sevenpence a yard now!'

'I thought it would be as cheap as butter muslin!'

'Not even butter muslin!'

Now I rarely saw Merton alone, Gina followed me to his room, either by Merton's wish or her own, and the conversation was inhibited and uneasy. My letters were read by Gina; there was no friendly

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privacy. Yet if I stayed long in London, Merton would write, apparently anxious for me to come. When I arrived at Deer's Farm, almost at once I was asked to go up and see him. But conversation became painfully restricted for I began to feel acutely that he was jealous of my health, it was as if he felt the young alone should have it, and I became unable to talk of my activities, for it seemed that I was boasting, and sometimes when leaving I felt as if poisoned arrows were flung at my back. I thought it safe to mention good B.B.C. programmes, which Merton could share, but Gina interrupted this with cool scorn, '*We* only listen to the Woman's Hour, or the Children's, they're the best, there's nothing else worth listening to,' which finished the conversation. When she went out of the room I said,

'I must not be ill, yet I should not be well. Mrs. Clough and Amy . . . and now Sydney? Then you'd forgive me, that's what you're thinking.'

Swiftly his lids flapped down, completely covering his eyes, he simply gasped '. . . Oh . . . ' and could not lift his head. 🖐

‘IVOR’s coming back!’

‘O good! I *am* glad. And now Gina will be able to have her holiday.’

‘No, she doesn’t seem at all keen to go away—what I really want to ask you is, if you would still entertain the idea of selling me a bit of the meadow, because if I can get a site, and *if* I can get permission to build *and* a licence, two different things, Finding says he can build me a tiny house quite easily. It sounds so hopeful that I’ve been drawing little plans.’ I hesitated, surprised by this request. ‘But perhaps you now feel that to cut off a piece of the meadow would take away from the value of the house.’

‘It would, Merton.’

‘I myself don’t think it would, since in some ways there’s almost too much land at the moment to keep in perfect order; I’ve been ’phoning Finding, and he says on no account buy a bit of land without getting permission to build, because the new law forbids any development without government sanction. I don’t think they could find any objection to fitting in a *tiny* house here, do you?’

Years ago, I had said, amusingly, fantastically, that there was space for a tiny house in the meadow; in fact there was no chance at all of one being allowed there. The land was scheduled as agricultural; no further building was permitted in the area.

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I explained this to Merton, but he did not believe it. His request, taking advantage of a light remark made years ago, long before he came with Gina to live in our house, was a remarkable one. He knew my dislike of refusals; he must have known that any building in the most secluded corner of the meadow would have spoilt the quiet beauty, the view, the privacy, and ultimately the money value. Now, sometimes Merton seemed possessed by self-interest or Gina's desires; he must own our house, or one on our land. Building even the smallest house would have been too much for him, it seemed far wiser for him to remain as he was. Several times I had told him that I wished he would feel settled, but to move or not according to his wishes. This time I ended by saying very gently,

'Please stay here, you're really better as you are. I *wish* you'd like it as it is, and not bother.'

He left out any reply or sign. Did he think I was making claims, being possessive?

Merton was very ill again; it seemed long since he had left his bed. All was quiet now, waiting for him to improve. I said to Gina, 'What does the new doctor say?' She would not tell me, she was secret. Dr. Charles Essex was never seen now.

We were there, very quietly, intending to stay two nights. During the first morning Gina came to the music room and asked if I would like to go to Tenfield in the car. I wanted the peace of the country and refused. She looked disappointed and I was sorry. •

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In the early evening I heard the engine of the car again. I went out and told her that I should like to go too, and we started at once for a small town, where Merton's new doctor lived, four or five miles away.

It had been a misty day, with the country delicately drawn and fading away like a Chinese painting. Then it had cleared; the sun had gone down, and the trees and hedges were dark against a pinkish sky.

We talked little. I wanted to enjoy the drive in the country lanes, winding along by the bare trees and open fields; soon we were in the pleasant little country town. It was almost dark when we stopped outside the doctor's house, and Gina went inside.

In the wide street I watched the lighted country buses moving slowly away; I saw the dark sky with the fine church tower like flat deep velvet against it.

When Gina came out, she was carrying two small shiny white boxes, with neat blue edges, which contained the morphia she was fetching. I said, 'They look like jewel boxes.' As she put them in the pigeon hole, I saw that her face looked ragged, and as if the deep vertical lines there were painfully dividing and dislocating her emotions. I searched for words, for words of encouragement.

'You do so much for Merton, I wish I could do more to help—you'd tell me?' I said clumsily, and she drove out of the town and up the hill.

I thought of Merton lying there in pain, only his nose and mouth uncovered. I wished I knew more, that I could help him more. Was he having all the

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comforts he needed? He certainly was not, but surely it was as he had chosen for himself . . . I turned to watch the headlights of a car as it drove towards us down the hill, and in its light I was astonished by the look of Gina. Her left cheek was working up and down like some extraordinary toy, her aquiline face blue.

‘What is the matter?’

She did not speak.

Was it due to overwork? Perhaps it was a fit?

‘Shall we stop here for a moment, wouldn’t you like to?’

But she drove on through the hamlet, past the gravel works, into a desolate lane and stopped.

I looked at the back of her head, at her thick hair, and was going to speak, when suddenly she turned towards me, and I heard a stream of abuse,

‘. . . you’re old, you repeat yourself . . . you’re always wanting flattery.’

‘O . . .’

‘Then why did you ask if there’s anything *you* can do?’

With the utmost menace, with glittering hating eyes, she half rose, leant over me and lifting her strong arm she screamed,

‘Why are you always vying with me?’

I was completely mystified by this extraordinary outburst of passion, and seeing that she was out of control, I quickly opened the door of the car and started to walk home.

In a few minutes she passed me, and said in a soft voice,

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‘Don’t be silly, Sydney, you can’t *walk* home.’

It seemed wisest to make no reply, and she drove on.

Later in the evening we went quietly from the music room. I had seen Merton earlier, he would not notice. Surely, even Gina would not disturb him, as he lay so very ill, with an account of her curious behaviour? Austin locked the music-room door for the first time; we no longer could feel at ease that Gina and her friends should make use of our room.

It had been the most frightful time, Merton wrote, ever since I had left, and now he felt completely flattened out, as if he could not pull himself together. And apart from having to postpone Henri’s visit, they had found our music-room door locked. Then I felt very guilty: we never should have locked our door because of Gina’s behaviour. Merton asked if I preferred Henri not to come, but he was, his letter continued, floating in a dream world and had no care about anything.

I sent the key, letting him assume that we had taken it by mistake. He replied at once that Ivor had made up my bed for Henri, but at the last minute he did not come. They were furious, since he seemed to imagine, he wrote, that he could turn up at any moment and they would be pleased to see him. They had now arranged if he did not come that evening, he must not come at all, so I was not to feel that he might be popping down on us in the music room at any time. Then he told me he had a new problem, a most unpleasant gasping for

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breath. Did I think it was asthma, something he had never had in his life. Once it was very disturbing, but since then he'd only 'wheezed like a pug dog', but sitting in a howling wind made him feel better. He would ask his new doctor about it; it was very annoying because it stopped him from eating and getting fat. He wrote that he was sorry that I and Gina had had an argument in the car when he was ill; he could not tell how it had arisen, but he was sure that Gina would bear no ill will, for her flashes of anger seemed to be just temporary upsets. He praised Ivor's behaviour, writing that he had been excellent, apart from one set-to, when he ranted that Merton would be quite all right if he got up and dressed, and they had both yelled at him. He wondered why it was so difficult for rather a simple person to grasp that another is ill, and did I think it was just lack of imagination?

Austin had been alone to Deer's Farm, to bring back news of Merton, but when I had this letter I went there the next day. I wondered if the gasping for breath was due to his heart; I did not know.

I found him sitting up in bed with the windows behind him wide open, and I thought he might be better.

I was sure that Gina would now dislike seeing me, that I should be allowed to speak to Merton alone. But at once she came into the room, and drew her chair as close as possible to my side. I turned away, ignoring her. She settled herself, solidly, implacably, as if to remain there for the whole of my visit.

I dread a scene, yet I said,

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'Merton, I should like to speak to you for a minute.'

'You go, Gina,' Merton said at once.

Still she lingered, moving about the room.

'Merton, I want to talk to you alone.'

'Yes, go, Gina, I want to talk to Sydney.'

Reluctantly, she sidled out, and I shut the door fast.

'Merton.'

'Yes?'

'It's nothing much, nothing whatever to bother about, but, Merton, look at me for I want to make this clear. I'm *dismayed*, but I'm not vying with Gina or jealous. I want you to be happy. You must believe me.'

Merton looked steadily at me, and made a long-drawn-out '—Ah——' I saw I had opened a door of comprehension, and a thin shaft of light was coming through, and we spoke of other things, easily; not bothering to say very much, but together, more friendly and contented than we had been for a long, long time.

A few days later I was there for another brief visit. We had tea and talked together. He wrote his inscription in his new book. We spoke of characters in the poems, laughing at the memories. I thought he was much better. But I did not dare to go often, for fear of some further disturbance, which might dangerously upset him.

There was only one way I could have news of Merton, to telephone Gina. The accounts of him seemed encouraging, so I waited till I thought it was smooth and safe for me to see him again.

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I arranged to go for the day. It seemed like an effort of kindness from Gina, when she offered to meet me with the car at the station. It was in the middle of a bitterly cold morning, when I arrived.

Gina asked if I would mind if she did some shopping in the district, 'Anyhow you couldn't see Merton yet; I left him in his bath.' It was an hour and a half later when we, at last, arrived at Deer's Farm.

I sat by the fire in the sitting-room, trying to get warm. Ivor was gentle and kind, and brought me a plate of something to eat, and pleasantly said,

'Merton won't be long, he's in his bath.'

Then Gina came, in a dilly-dallying way, to tell me how a 'fan' acquaintance and her scientist friend had visited Merton, and how she and the scientist had been to the races not many miles away, and 'I won £100, but don't tell Merton, he'd be *furious*. You know how he *hates* betting,' and from the piano she took a small pile of letters, addressed to Merton or to her, which she handed me to read, to interest me as I ate my lunch and waited. I turned these over distractedly, reading good wishes, kind thoughts, and concern about Merton's health.

On the mantelpiece, next to the cigarettes chosen by Gina for me, I saw the writing of the 'fan' acquaintance. I took it from its envelope and read, '... I certainly will not tell Sydney how *dreadfully* ill Merton is, as you say she is so emotional.' I heard Gina coming. I replaced it where it had been, and tried to steady myself to walk upstairs.

Merton was sitting up in bed, and, as always, appeared to be temporarily resting there. He was

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dressed in light-coloured striped pyjamas, unusual for him, and said,

‘At least my clothes are clean.’

‘You look good, sparkling with cleanliness.’

And Gina came in and sat down.

The door opened again, and Ivor looked in saying,

‘What would you like for your lunch, little Merton?’

‘What has Sydney had? There’s pheasant, didn’t you cook it for our guest?’

‘That’s waiting for you, Merton,’ Gina kindly said.

‘Well, what *is* there?’

‘. . . There are some roast potatoes,’ Ivor said, as if they were the food he would have chosen.

‘O . . . yes, and bring coffee for Sydney. Arrange it well . . . the Worcester cups . . .’

We were alone till Gina brought two trays, the curious meal for Merton, and the other with coffee for three. Gina poured it out, while Merton began to eat one of the deliciously browned potatoes.

Merton spoke of his ‘elephantine’ legs. I had not known before that he had this symptom. He was amusing about it and made me laugh.

Gina removed a tray downstairs, and Merton asked me if I thought he would swell all over, and talked for some time of his physical troubles, as if he needed me to know all that he could tell.

He noticed my new coat, and asked me to stand up for him to see it better, remarking that he was ignorant now, but was it the fashion to have it so long. ‘You look like a nun, or is it a monk?’

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I gave him a little present; he was very pleased, praising it too much; he gave me the neat grey fountain-pen, with which I am now writing.

I said I would leave him to rest for a while, and when he protested, I assured him that very soon I would be with him again, and he waved me a little kiss as I went out of the room.

On the empire couch beneath, I tried to read. Soon I heard movements and talking above, and Merton called, 'Sydney, Sydney.'

I met Gina on the stairs: 'Merton wants to see you again,' and she followed me in.

He was sitting, as before, half-reclining, with the pillows disarranged behind.

'Will you get us tea, Gina?' and Gina looked weary and unwilling. I thought, 'But Ivor will be helping her, there's nothing *I* can do.'

Gina brought in tea and listened to our quiet conversation. Suddenly Merton stopped, his body stiffened, his face blue-white, distorted and rigid with pain. I glanced for help to Gina, who said she would get morphia, and she returned with the hypodermic syringe waving in the air. But Merton was better, the torture had gone by.

Gina put the syringe on a plate, left there from tea, which lay on the flat top of a chest, and she sat down again, and I said, nervous of staying too long,

'Merton, it's getting late, soon I must go.'

'Gina, take the other tray down, will you?' Merton plainly showed that he wanted her to go, and she left with it, but soon came in again, and I said,

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'I'll tell you *at once*, if Merton needs you.'

'Do *go*, Gina,' Merton said.

Again she went out, but returned to wander round the room, vaguely looking about. We waited. Then Merton asked with irritation what she wanted, and she said she had mislaid the morphia, and was uncertain if that already in the syringe should be used.

'Ask Sydney, *she'll* know.'

I replied that she had come with it from her room, and that I thought she would find the untouched morphia there.

For a few minutes we were alone. Merton asked me to try the new pen that he had given me, to compare it with his own, a similar one, and we wrote on his block of paper, each trying the other's. He showed me how to fill it, demonstrating with his own as well. He handed me mine again saying, 'You *use* it, Sydney.'

I felt 'Time is going, time is going: I am inadequate, someone far better than I should be sitting with Merton now, someone whose spirit is so clear that he could voice the wonderful words that are strangled in my heart——'

Gina called up the stairs to say she was waiting to drive me to the station.

I lingered: Merton said, 'O *must* you go?' and looked as if he had something troubling him, something important left unsaid. I hovered, thinking, 'But surely it's best for Merton that I should leave him now. What might Gina *do* if I stay still longer? I'll see him again very soon . . .'

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I stood up but was unable to move to the door, gazing at Merton I saw his face alone. It was glorified with compassion; I could hardly bear the strength that came from his eyes, the tenderness that *I* should suffer. I slowly pulled myself, retreating, to the door, said 'Merton——' and I left him.

The following day it seemed wiser not to telephone.

In The Manor House I wandered from one room to another and each seemed muffled and half dark—I stood by the window of the room used by Merton when he was a child, and I spoke to myself: 'Of what are you so frightened? Is it of death?—No, no, so much valiance against the pain and the destruction, how could it be borne much longer?—it's the vague and stifling horror, horror! horror!! . . . and he wanted to tell me something—but there's time, time to see him again. Patience, a little more patience—but what is happening there, so far away? . . . the cold and empty bathroom—and dying? Be quiet: things are often strange; he was always wilful: he is not a child: he knew his own wishes. All very ill people are as children, and for months . . . lying there—helpless out of the world . . . O God, what should I do?—if you are there, look down on us—take care of this child—of Thy child, Thy child O God——'

The day after I could bear it no longer and at two o'clock I telephoned. Ivor answered and he was crying.

'O Ivor, is Merton worse? Please speak to me—tell me——'

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Tears were muddled with his voice, 'I can't say anything, I'll call Gina—' and presently, 'She can't come, she'll ring later.'

At four Gina telephoned that Merton had died at two o'clock. . . .

Helga was speaking on the telephone when she said '... but isn't it wonderful, Merton's spirit, right up to the end. Imagine anyone else *attempting* to get to the post. Amazing!'

'To the post, I hadn't heard, who told you?'

'Daddy rang up, he told me; it was a day or two before he died, I think he said. What extraordinary courage he had.'

'I should like to hear more. Will you telephone your father now, and ask him *all* he knows about it?'

In a few minutes the telephone rang.

'Daddy says he heard at The Plough. Stoneley Raymond was there, they were all talking about it, amazed at Merton's spirit. Gina found him, I think. Daddy was only in the pub a minute, getting a bottle of beer; he doesn't know any more.' We talked again of Merton's courage, and rang off.

Austin and I went down to the music room to be at Deer's Farm for the burial service the following day.

The cab drew up, and Ivor ran out to meet us. 'Mr. and Mrs. Evelyn, you *must* come upstairs, do come . . .' he said with warmth and gentle excite-

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ment. I was unprepared, and held back for a moment, wondering whether Merton would like the intrusion of his helpless privacy, but I saw Ivor's quiet believing spirit, and we followed him through the kitchen and up the stairs to Merton's room.

The floor was brightly patterned with collections of different coloured flowers, and raised to one side was a slender light oak coffin, open, lined with white satin.

Ivor left us.

I looked in at a cover of Christmas roses; I saw the high collar of the black dressing-gown that Merton used to wear. I saw a square of white blank paper above it . . . Austin moved his hand towards it, 'O no . . . no,' but he removed it, and I held myself to see the quiet alabaster mask of death. I was astonished. I had never before seen Merton's face more eager, almost laughing. He looked so lively as he lay among the green-white Christmas roses, only the small square end of his nose had taken the same colour. The petals fell against his crisp and curling hair . . .

I was alone, and the room seemed isolated . . . then Ivor came. He looked at Merton's face, and seeing that his mouth was slightly open, in a kind and businesslike way he firmly held his chin and tried to close it. Surprised I watched him, thinking that he felt no disrespect in touching him who now was so defenceless; he disbelieved in death, in pain, in evil. He turned away and from a table took a large sea-shell with which he tried to make a wedge beneath his chin . . . his attempts were

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useless and going to the door he said, 'You should make a drawing of him,' and obediently I followed to get some paper and a pencil.

I tried to draw the fine shapes of the elongated face; I vaguely felt that he would come alive again, and nervously, I lightly touched his forehead with one finger. Hearing someone coming I moved away to re-arrange the flowers I had brought, and Gina looked around the door to say, 'I can't think how you can take that white thing from his face,' and disappeared again.

I composed myself to draw, and looking at the sun shining on the many coloured flowers, the daffodils, the lilies, and the sweet-smelling freezias, the room seemed to sing, to praise, to turn to clearest gold.

How beautifully Ivor had arranged the room, how calm he was. Gina was excited about the Rolls-Royce cars to be at the station ('will any of the "nobs" be there, do you think?'), the 'fully choral' service, the coffee and sandwiches, 'nothing to drink for Merton would hate that', and the reading of the will, 'when *everyone* is there there'll be the reading of the will!' Gina was transporting us to a strange nineteenth-century world. She told me how Stoneley Raymond had chanced to call in the early evening of the day of Merton's death, and had spent some time with her. Gina wanted to talk, not to stop talking, and she soon followed me into the music room. Standing there I told her the curious story of Merton's trying to go to the post; with a

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calm brow and clear eyes she said 'that's just village gossip' and no more was said.

The following morning was sunfy, and silver frost stiffened the grass. I could hear voices through the wall, and Gina called for us to come, rather urgently.

I cannot remember who was in the sitting-room. There were four or five people quietly talking, waiting, moving about. The door was open, and I saw the slender coffin being lifted, moved, and jerked almost upright down the bend in the stairs. . . .

Then Gina called me from outside by the front door, and there on the sparkling ground were flowers lying, and she said, 'Will you put yours on the coffin?' and I did.

People began to collect outside, and Gina said efficiently, 'Ivor, you and I follow.'

I waited for someone to go next, and Austin and I followed two middle-aged women, and we started to walk slowly along the winding path round the house to the road. Suddenly Ivor called, 'My flowers are not there!' and ran back, caught them up from the ground, and with the modest sheaf held in his arms like a child, he ran sweetly after the light coffin, which was supported by four tall black men, and the solemn little procession continued on its way to the large dark cars in the road. There, one of the women glanced at me, and taking the arm of her companion, they swerved from the front car, which now contained Ivor and Gina, and disappeared behind, and one of the tall black men showed Austin and me into the seats behind the driver. We started off very slowly, by the red letter

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box, following, looking at, the large glass box, filled with flowers that covered the pale coffin; through the village, then more quickly in the sunny country for several miles to the church. . . . I found myself thinking, 'I *must* tell Merton about this,' and remembered; I was confused again with the thoughts of the story he would make of it. . . .

Several people were in the sitting-room, waiting there. A business-man cousin of Merton's and others were making desultory conversation as they drank their coffee. Soon, a young lawyer was shown in, and sat down. After making a few comments rather nervously, he began reading the will, which was made, I noticed, soon after Amy's death. I saw Ivor sitting straight and dignified, blushing to inherit a few hundred pounds; there was a small legacy each to Merton's brothers, and to Gina, who was cringing with embarrassment and deathly white, the remainder, which would include all literary rights. Why had she wanted this public reading, for clearly she disliked it?

Presently Gina said the solicitor wanted to speak to her, to discuss business. 'Sydney, could they all go into the music room?' and we straggled round the house.

It was untidy and cold there. The fire was nearly out but we sat round the grate, making conversation. Suddenly the cousin asked me, 'Did they look after Merton well?' and everyone listened as I replied in a flat voice,

'Yes, very well.'

Gina sometimes telephoned. One day she asked if there was anything I should like of Merton's. I thanked her and said that Merton had wished me to have the red and gold chest for The Manor House. Gina gasped, and I waited: she said she had heard nothing about it; I did not understand why that should have been necessary, but she said she would send it by carrier. I asked her not to trouble, but to leave it where it was at Deer's Farm when she moved in a few weeks' time, which was the arrangement we had made together.

I wondered if I had asked too much, but the chest was not of great value, and Merton had intended me to have it.

I asked her for Graham's telephone number, he was an old friend of Merton's, whose name I could not find in the book; I wanted to see someone I had met and liked who had known Merton for so many years. When Gina hesitated, as if she were withholding it, I thought perhaps she had mislaid the number, and said, 'Don't bother, I'll ask Max, he'll know, he's in the book,' and then she quickly told it to me.

And one day Gina motored to The Manor House, and behaved as if she were placating us. She spoke of Merton's withheld, unpublished work. I remembered several poems he had turned against; 'they're

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orphans, and hidden away—ashamed’, and I asked Gina if she were intending publication, and she replied,

‘O no, they couldn’t possibly be published—it’s all in Tenfield; not till some people are dead.’

‘My death do you mean?’ and she nodded an assent.

She asked if we would be coming to Deer’s Farm; she asked in such an interested way that I thought she must be very lonely there, especially as she had taken the trouble to drive to The Manor House to see us; and she was urgent that we should let her know the time when we would arrive at the station, for then she would meet us with the car.

A few days later Graham came to tea, and we talked all the time about Merton. I asked if he had heard the silly village gossip that Merton had attempted, soon before he died, to go out, and he spontaneously cried,

‘But it’s true! Gina telephoned Max the day before Merton died, and told him about it, and he told me.’

I was sure that if Merton had felt the need to leave a message, that message was for me. I had left him, the last time, with pen and paper in his hand, when Gina had driven me to the station. Later, that same evening, so Gina had told me, Merton had become delirious, and then unconscious . . . surely Gina could not withhold a last message? was it possible . . .? Or were the stories of his last efforts to go out, to reach the post, all a curious fabrication, inventions that did not fit?

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Casually from another source I heard of a little incident that puzzled me. It was said that Denis, a young business man who had been at school with Merton, whom I had met once, was staying at Deer's Farm typing the private poems, as Gina was hoping for their immediate publication. I did not understand. Why had Gina herself mentioned the work, and to say it was in Tenfield, and why Tenfield?

All was horrible confusion.

But I believed that kindness too was contained in Gina's muddled heart. Perhaps if I approached her again, I should recognize the truth about Merton's last days, or she would tell me quite simply; she was often unpredictable. Or *was* there something for her to fear?

We went to Deer's Farm, and Gina met us at the station with the car. As we were getting out of it, I said lightly, 'O Gina, someone said Denis was here, typing; is he here now?'

'However *could* he be; there's nothing here,' and with a calm face and wide gesture in the air, 'It's all in Tenfield; it's a letter he's been typing, two short letters.' And I almost believed her.

Later in the evening, she came in a friendly and lonely way, and sat by the music-room fire. We were talking easily as we drank our coffee. Austin went outside to get some wood, and I said quietly as my heart banged,

'You remember that gossip, wasn't it peculiar? Did Merton ever . . .' She leapt up, clattering her coffee cup; roughly flinging me to one side, she shouted,

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'You bloody bitch, I'll murder you, I'll murder you!' and struck out at me, wild and glaring, and stumbled to the door, where she met Austin coming in. She was oddly quiet for a few moments, then shouted a collection of obscene words, and made off in the darkness.

I should *never* know, but was it so important? Surely Merton had expressed all he might have written, when I last saw him? It was terrible to create such violence in his friend. Was it unfair bullying, if she had something to conceal? Could Merton care now? Where was he? In the corner of the room, or waving from the trees?

I *must* make peace, why try to understand? Merton had said that Gina's passions were unaccountable but soon over.

We walked to The Plough, lingered for a while, walked slowly back, and knocked on the door. Ivor came.

'Gina won't see you!' he said, impressed and held.

We were turning away, when she came out, lurching from the sitting-room, with flying hair, curved arms and shut fists, shouting violent remarks. Austin stood in front of her, barred her way, touched her arm, and said, 'Now, now, Gina,' very gently, and she waited for a few moments, but again she took a menacing attitude and began yelling abuse, so we quickly walked away, with '—— bastards' hurled at our backs, and on into the darkness of the meadow.

I have never seen her since.

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Some weeks later Austin went to Deer's Farm alone, and opening one of our books from the shelf, a letter fell from its pages. Picking it up Austin saw it began 'Dear Mrs. Evelyn', and not recognizing the handwriting he turned it over and saw it came from Denis, and he gave it to me on his return. It confirmed the incident that Gina had denied with such an unruffled face: he had been at Deer's Farm for the purpose of typing the private notes and poems. He had written this letter to me, forwarded it to Gina for her approval, and under the circumstances created by her, she was unable to advise him to send it. By Gina's mistake, or by Ivor's intention, it had been left in our book that must have been borrowed. The letter expressed horror that I had had a row with Gina, when she had told me that he was typing the poems, which Denis believed I had appealed to Gina for, and been denied the privilege of reading. Merton, it misinformed me, had never allowed anyone to see his work before it was published, nor did he ever mention its subject. It detailed my faults, while praising his own male wisdom. It rambled on, piteously deceived by Gina. I wished it had not come into my hands; it was singularly cruel.

All was shadowed and numbed by mourning and confusion.

When it was time for Gina to leave Deer's Farm, we returned to the vacant house. Austin went in first, and found hanging conspicuously over the fireplace, to dominate the empty room, the small

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portrait of Gina that I had given to Merton: nothing else: the red and gold chest that Merton had wished me to have had gone.

But in the evening, I opened the cupboard in the room that had been Ivor's: standing side by side, seeming to wait for me, were the two Worcester bowls that Merton had prized so much, and staring from the painted flowers of one was 'Bon Soir'. My heart went out to Ivor, how kind and how secret.

DURING the early summer Stoneley Raymond resumed his occasional visits to Deer's Farm. He always brought his daughter or a friend. Remembering that he was said to have been in 'The Plough' when there had been talk of Merton's last days, made us feel that he was barricading himself from any private conversation; he often seemed close and secretive. But Austin, meeting him by chance in the country alone, tentatively questioned him, and he replied very evasively, 'Why don't you ask Gina?' Austin was silent for he did not want to speak of her. We longed to forget the turmoil, to enjoy the last months we should spend at Deer's Farm.

Spring came and the green growth was too much, it seemed like an enveloping animal remorselessly pushing its way into the quiet house where Merton had been, and I searched and searched for him. I waited in his room, I looked by the lake in the park, I cried to the trees and the sky. . .

But later we invited our friends, and there was laughter and enjoyment in the sun: scythes swish-swished in the meadow, fruit hung from the trees—and hammocks with cushions and books. There was music and painting again.

The new owners of Deer's Farm were coming the

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following day. In the morning while returning from a walk in the park, Austin and a friend who was staying with us had met Stoneley, who was on his way to the station, and they had offered him a lift in their cab. I was staying till the early evening. Wishing to leave his bicycle at Deer's Farm, Stoneley asked me where it should go, and I said, 'Just lean it against the tree,' but Austin, with more caution, knowing that I should be gone before he returned to fetch it, asked him to put it in the hut, and they drove away.

I swept the empty rooms, and when it was all tidy, I went into each one to say goodbye. I wandered in the garden and the meadow, all was silent—waiting. I looked inside the house again, and faintly called upstairs, 'It's all right, it's all right,' and went outside and quietly locked the door.

Standing in the garden as I waited for the station cab, I saw the hedges, trees and flowers that we had planted, the lawns that we had made, the roses still in flower. I thought of all the life that had been spent and lavished there, of the new people who were coming—far away and here merged together: through the clatter and the muddle of defilement I cried for forgiveness, for insight, for an open heart, an open heart . . .

Slowly, in the golden evening I walked over the grass to the waiting car. Glancing back as we drove away, I saw I had left, by mistake, the bathroom window open, and the evening sun was reflected in the panes. It was unimportant, I thought, for the new owners were coming the next day, and holding

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my practical handbag I settled myself in the corner of the car.

A few days later I received this odd and puzzling letter:

Dear Sydney,

I have hesitated for some ~~days~~ before writing, but I feel compelled to tell you about the following experience. My notes will be very brief.

I returned to Deer's Farm during the evening of the day you left, and after taking out my bicycle, I stood in front of the house in the dusk, which strangely reminded me of one of the scenes in 'Mourning becomes Electra'. I thought 'Is there any sign?' but nothing occurred, except the quiet rustle of the wind in the trees—then suddenly running over the silences was a high 'astral' singing, without doubt the overtones of Merton's voice—high-spirited and strange, with a sense of 'being there' of greater vitality than we normally experience, or so it will *always* seem to me.

It was quiet again. I walked round to the back, and *felt* Merton at the bathroom window, then I *felt* the urgent words '... in the garden ... in the garden ... in the garden' as if there was something concealed there. I remembered later the insistent urge I had in the morning to leave my bicycle by *the tree* where you had suggested. This may have been a 'transmission' to which I should have yielded.

It was dark when I left. It will be as real to

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me *always* as it was then. I hardly feel it was intended for me, but if it should mean something to you and I think it will, you probably need someone far more skilled than I am in these matters, but anything I can do will be freely given.

With best wishes to Austin and yourself,

STONELEY

I was surprised and upset too, and said to Austin, 'What does it mean? Does he suggest that we dig in the new owner's garden, or sit in some dark stuffy room waiting for raps, voices, or flashing lights?'

Austin replied, 'He's a reticent kind and never an interfering man, and to him the experience is real and he had to write.' And we spoke of his interest in the occult, of his nervous and secretive nature.

I thought of his solitary figure in the confusing twilight, the haunting emptiness of people gone; the window open to the deserted house; the electric wires vibrating in the north-west breeze: all these would give a ghostly awareness.

But I found it an embarrassing letter and replied in a non-committal way. I wondered if his experiences were all a fantasy, or were the result of some inhibited knowledge, or perhaps he was telling me, without directly implicating himself, that he knew of Merton's attempt to reach the post.

But it had seemed best to leave it with the other questions that never would be solved.

At The Manor House I slept in the room where Merton had been when he was a child. When

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alone and in the night I looked into the farthest corner of it, and I pondered about him. What was the vision he had given me? It was not only in the delicate sympathy, fine courage, and rare gifts. It shone through his impishness, through the persecutions and the greeds; yes, I had to admit they were there. But what was it that illumined the whole and that I should never forget? I was unable to name it, but I knew it was the essence that we find with wonder, gratitude and deep homage in pictures, music, books, people—anywhere, and in people it is never forgotten. And the space in the room seemed to speak to me, and I to it, and deepening it became unconfined by the walls, it was everything and everywhere.

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